

For ethnography in political geography: Experiencing and re-imagining Ferghana Valley boundary closures

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Abstract

Political geographers have produced extensive and valuable bodies of knowledge on both international boundaries and geopolitics. However, an emphasis on discourse study means that these literatures are in danger of becoming both repetitious and lopsided, relegating or even erasing people's experiences and everyday understandings of the phenomena under question. This article suggests that ethnographic participant observation, a method largely neglected by political geographers, could be used to address these imbalances and open new research directions. This argument is demonstrated by a study of the impact of the partial closure in 1999–2000 of the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley boundary. Post-Soviet time was hyper-accelerated by the belated imposition of the logic of nation–states onto the existing social geographies of kinship practice. The legal–constitutional division of the Valley in 1991 only 'caught up' with the lived experiences of borderland dwellers in 1999. The sudden collapse of this 'political geographical time-lag' forced upon them the traumatic realisation that Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan really were two separate countries. In this context, using ethnography to highlight discrepancies between elite and everyday political geographical imaginations informs a critique of state violence that is parallel to, but not a replacement of, textual analyses informed by critical social theory.

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Keywords: Political geography; Ethnography; Uzbekistan; Kyrgyzstan; International boundaries; Critical geopolitics

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Introduction

This article argues that ethnographic participant observation is 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. It illustrates this contention by considering the impact of the sudden imposition of a stringent boundary enforcement regime along the previously porous Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley border in 1999 (Fig. 1).

Although this international boundary had formally come into existence with the implosion of the Soviet Union almost a decade earlier, in borderland ‘political geographical imaginations’¹ it remained a legal fiction. This mismatch was suddenly collapsed in 1999 when post-Soviet time was hyper-accelerated by the belated imposition of the exclusionary logic of the nation–state. The spatial and social practices of kinship networks, which had previously mapped a social and moral geography of the border region, were threatened by measures asserting a new political geography of independent nation–statehood. These included unilateral boundary demarcation, the closure of crossing points, the construction of a militarised landscape of boundary defence around a barbed-wire perimeter fence, and the enforcement of stringent new passport and visa regimes. This paper is an analytical record of the human trauma of that brief moment when the political geographical imaginations of borderland dwellers were violently remoulded in accordance with those of the elites.

It begins by sketching a brief account of the background to the border crisis, before demarcating a disciplinary context within two branches of political geography, critical geopolitics and international boundary studies. Suggesting that both have been poor at incorporating an appreciation of everyday human experience with textual analysis,² it proposes that ethnography is a highly appropriate tool to correct this imbalance. It demonstrates how that might be done, with reference to the 1999–2000 Ferghana Valley border crisis, before concluding by summarising the consequence of the argument for Central Asian studies and political geography.

Historical background

The background to this research is Uzbekistan’s unilateral measures to control movement across its previously porous boundary in 1999 and 2000. I have written at length about this elsewhere (Megoran, 2004, 2005a; see also Polat, 2002) and, as this work builds on my previous research, I will not substantially repeat that material here. However, a brief overview of events in the Valley at that time is necessary to outline the context.

Although it has been subject to a large number of successive rulers, the Ferghana Valley has been under the control of a single political entity for much of its history (Bregel, 2003). The early Soviet rulers divided it up between the Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tajik Soviet Socialist Republics as constituent segments of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. It was these republics that formed the basis of the independent states of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with

¹ A ‘political geographical imagination’ is the way in which people experience, conceive of, or desire a particular configuration of the relationship between space, ethnicity, nation, and political community.

² Although the argument in this paper is applied only to political geography, it may have wider disciplinary resonances: Cloke (2002) has argued that the theoretical sophistication of human geography has rendered it increasingly unable to articulate a sense for the other that is emotional, connected and committed.

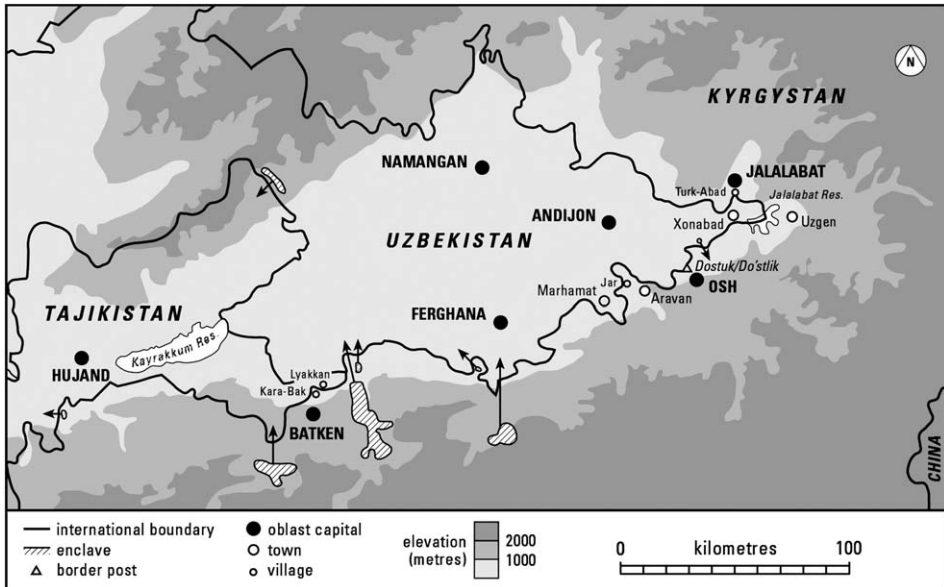


Fig. 1. The Ferghana Valley, showing oblast (regional) capitals and towns and villages referred to in the text.

the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Smith, 1996). Republican boundaries became international boundaries, but their immediate impact was slight (Megoran, 1996). Although the adoption of a new national iconography including flags, postage stamps, currencies, and laws led to a gradual differentiation of the three states, it was not until 1998–2000 that boundaries really began to matter to borderland dwellers.³

Elites in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan used these events to frame political geographical imaginations about the relationship between nation, people, ethnicity and territory, and geopolitical imaginations about the roles of their states in the international system. The Uzbek government portrayed the border as a moral line between the noble Uzbek nation and threatening outsiders or unpatriotic traitors. Kyrgyz nationalistic opposition movements claimed that Uzbekistan's border policies were the main threat to the nation, linking the weakness of its borders with perceived ethnic and national weaknesses in the face of ethnic minorities.⁴ It is these political geographical imaginations of elites that this study will contrast with those of borderland dwellers.

³ This study focuses on the period of 1999 and 2000 as the key time in developments in Ferghana Valley border control policy since the break up of the Soviet Union. Subsequent visits to the places discussed in this article were made in 2004, 2005 and 2006. These visits reinforced my argument that 1999–2000 was indeed a truly pivotal moment, but it is beyond the scope of this article to consider developments post-2000. There were no substantial changes on the ground, although people had become more accustomed to the post-1999 changes.

⁴ Here, an unspoken narrative was that the presence of Uzbek minorities in Kyrgyzstan would provoke a repeat of the violent inter-communal disturbances that left hundreds dead and injured in the Osh and Uzgen areas in 1990. Up until the 1960s, many of the significant urban areas of the Kyrgyz segment of the Ferghana Valley had majority Uzbek populations, and the 1990 riots were precipitated by poorly administered moves to redistribute land outside the city of Osh to incoming Kyrgyz migrants (Asankanov, 1996; Tishkov, 1997). In spite of alarmist warnings to the contrary (for example, Rubin & Lubin, 1999), these events have not been repeated (Megoran, 2000, 2005b).

Theoretical background

Re-peopling political geography

Political geography remains a strong and vibrant element of contemporary human geography (Agnew, Mitchell, & Toal, 2003), and this is particularly true of the fields of study most relevant to this paper, (critical) geopolitics and international boundaries. However, whilst both these fields have been enhanced by the application of theoretically informed discourse analyses, the study of elite discourses remains only a partial contribution to the construction of a fuller understanding of the spatiality of political processes. Without a complementary study of the reception of these discourses by ‘ordinary people,’⁵ there is an ever-present danger of crafting lopsided or even irrelevant accounts (Brunn, 2002; O’Loughlin, 2001, pp. 44–45). Recognising this, Sharp criticises Ó Tuathail (1996) for reducing ‘ordinary people to culture industry drones, empty of agency and awaiting their regular injection of ideas’ (Sharp, 2000b, pp. 361–362). Nonetheless, her major response is, ironically, not to look at what ‘ordinary people’ think, but to produce a discursive study of the *Reader’s Digest* as ‘popular geopolitics’ (Sharp, 2000a). Likewise, in his useful study of senses of geopolitical national identity and border-crossing experiences along the Estonian–Russian boundary, Berg makes generalised statements about ‘local borderland population’ and ‘borderlanders and their border experience’. However, his empirical material for this grand category seems to consist of secondary references, general unsupported claims, and seven interviews with local government officials (Berg, 2000). Kofman’s description of the product of much contemporary political geography as creating a ‘landscape without any figures’, by focussing on discourse analysis at the expense of diverse experiences of geopolitical processes, is highly apt (quoted in Smith, 2001, p. 215). With studies of both geopolitics and international boundaries progressing well and new studies generally repeating existing patterns, it is the contention of this article that they could be enriched by a new research direction, and that this can be provided by the use of ethnographic participant observation.

Ethnography

‘Ethnography’ is a word that is used in different yet overlapping ways, which can lead to confusion in inter-disciplinary discussions. When referring to a method of research, it classically denotes an extended sojourn amongst a group of people where the researcher immerses himself or herself in daily life, continuously reflecting on meticulously kept fieldnotes, to learn the social understandings of the group in its own terms. Anthropologists sometimes describe this approach simply as ‘fieldwork’, and it may also be given the oxymoronic term ‘participant observation’, particularly by non-anthropologists. ‘Ethnography’ at times refers to a research project based on interviews, questionnaires and focus groups, or even the analysis of texts and images, and as a noun is commonly used to describe the monographic representation of ethnographic fieldwork. I will restrict my use of the terms ‘ethnography’ and ‘ethnographic participant observation’ to the first definition provided above, not to deny the validity of other research methods, but for the sake of clarity.

⁵ By ‘ordinary people’ I am in no way suggesting a homogenous subject group, but simply mean anyone who is not actively producing public geopolitical knowledge.

The epistemological distinction between ethnographic and social scientific research is crucial to grasp. Data are not waiting in the ‘field’ to be merely ‘plucked’: they are fashioned and influenced by the research methods that we use. Social scientific research methods such as surveys, semi-structured interviews, oral histories, and focus groups produce unique forms of data by creating particular controlled environments that are structured by power relations and discursive formats generally alien to everyday forms of interaction. Ethnographic participant observation tries to obviate these factors as the researcher patiently listens and takes part in social interactions that he/she has not created and does not control. Of course, the researcher’s presence may well alter the dynamics of interaction, power relations are never absent from research, and there is no guarantee that an ethnographer can correctly understand what he or she witnesses. Nonetheless, ethnography remains more sensitive to emic (self-ascribed) than etic (researcher-ascribed) categories and meanings.

Ethnography thus conceived traces its roots to Bronislaw Malinowski’s ground-breaking *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, which defined the goal of ethnographic study as being, ‘to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world’ by ‘plung[ing] into the life of the natives’ for an extended period of time (Malinowski, 1922, p. 25). The theory and practice of ethnographic participant observation are dynamic and under constant negotiation (see, for example, Onneweer & Pelckmans, 2005). Recent debates within anthropology have problematised ethnographic representation (Clifford, 1986), the marginalisation of other fieldwork paradigms (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Vincent, 1990), and the spatial definition of the field (Amit, 2000). These debates have led to a synthesis of a more humble and open anthropology that nonetheless maintains its commitment to attempting to understand the meanings and senses that others make of their world by use of ethnographic participant observation, ‘quietly seeking the local terms of life’ through ‘patient engagement’ (Dresch & James, 2000, p. 2).⁶ I shall argue in the next section that it is exactly this sense of ethnographic participant observation that political geographers can profitably embrace.

Ethnography in political geography and political anthropology

Ethnography, then, seeks ‘to understand parts of the world as they are experienced and understood in the everyday lives of the people who actually ‘live them out’ (Cook & Crang, 1995, p. 4). It has been much neglected within geography. Drawing the important distinction between ethnography and the use of interviews, surveys, and other social scientific methods, Herbert calculates that between 1993 and 1998 only 3.5% of articles in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* and 5% in *Society and Space* made use of ethnographic data (Herbert, 2000, p. 505). I generally support Herbert’s claims about the geographical neglect of ethnographic participant observation, although would prefer to make them on a *sub-disciplinary* rather than disciplinary level. Social/cultural/development geographers have been more open to the use of ethnographic participant observation (Crang, 1994; Katz, 2004; Nayak, 2003; Nietschmann, 1973; Parr, 1997; Valdivia, 2005). Rather, it is amongst political geographers that ethnographic studies have been rare (exceptions include Herbert, 1996; Veness, 1993; to an extent, Paasi, 1996). I calculate that between 1993 and 1998 fractionally under 1% of research articles in the flagship journal *Political Geography* used primary ethnographic data, but not a single piece in the first five years (1996–2000) of the sub-discipline’s other key periodical,

⁶ For a good example of the power of ethnography as deployed by anthropologists, see Vitebsky (1993).

Geopolitics. Where political geographic research does attempt to elicit everyday human understandings, it more commonly resorts to methods such as interviews (Anderson, 1994), focus groups (Goss & Leinbach, 1996) and opinion surveys (Boal, 1999).

Space does not permit an analysis of why ethnography should be so neglected within geography. Relevant factors include terminological slippage between disciplines, different traditions of geographical and anthropological fieldwork, and a skewed reading of anthropological debates based on an over-reliance on marginal critiques of the discipline by writers such as Clifford and Marcus. Whatever the reason, it is my contention that geographers commonly mean something subtly different to anthropologists when we use the word ‘ethnography’, and that we are poorer as a result. The anthropological method of research of that name that developed in the 20th century, based on continuous reflection over extended periods of participating in the daily life of research subjects, is a powerful way of illuminating emic categories of meaning. This is not to claim that it is the most superior or that it affords an epistemologically privileged vantage point, nor is it to denigrate other research methods. Ethnographic participant observation is by no means the most appropriate method for every research project and its insights can only ever be partial. However, due to misunderstandings over its nature, political geographers have largely missed an opportunity to explore its power. Used alongside textual and (in the context of boundaries) technico-legal studies, ethnographic participant observation could be a helpful tool to build up a fuller understanding of geopolitics and international boundaries. Indeed, because of its methodological eclecticism, human geography may have an advantage over anthropology in developing ethnography, as anthropologists still struggle with challenges to its totemic disciplinary centrality.

Having argued that ethnographic participant observation is a highly appropriate tool for political geographers to use to complement discursive and representational studies, I return to anthropology to provide more concrete models of the ethnographic study of international boundaries. Although anthropology has long interrogated the operation of political structures (Vincent, 1990, 2002), engagements with social theory and contemporary questions of statehood and sovereignty have revitalised political anthropology (Hansen & Stepputat, 2001b, 2005; Nugent & Vincent, 2004).

Anthropologists have produced many impressive studies of international borderlands, highlighting the impacts on experiences of identity and nationhood when boundaries disappear (Berdahl, 1997; Borneman, 1998), appear (Hann & Bellér-Hann, 1998; Miles, 1994; Shahrani, 2002(1979)) or persist over time (Cole & Wolf, 1974). For this study, I draw in particular upon the anthropological study of international borders by Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson. In the 1990s they accused anthropologists of shying away from scrutinizing the nation–state, and called on them to contribute to the study of nationalism by ethnographically exploring the imprecise fit of nation and state (Wilson & Donnan, 1998, p. 11). They consider the existing literature on borders to be insufficient. On the one hand, they argue, many social scientists continue to see the state as a given entity whose borders are a concomitant logical extension. This ignores internal inconsistencies and contradictions (Donnan & Wilson, 1999, p. 154). On the other hand, definitions of the political that concentrate on discourse and representation risk underestimating or ignoring the role that the state continues to play in the everyday lives of its own and other citizens (Wilson & Donnan, p. 1). They argue instead that a study of the state must involve an examination of how it is experienced in everyday life, as well as discursive representational practice. Nations and states, and their institutions, are composed of people who cannot and should not be reduced to the images which are constructed about them (Wilson & Donnan, p. 4).

They suggest that ethnographic participant observation can overcome this dichotomy, as a study of the everyday lives of border communities is simultaneously the study of the daily life of the state, illuminating ‘how power is demonstrated, projected and contested in the social, economic and political practices of quotidian life at international borders’ (Donnan & Wilson, 1999, p. 155). Their work articulates an exciting framework to explore the significance of international boundaries and the nation–state from an ethnographic perspective, and forms the background to this paper. The intention of this article is to complement my previous work on elite geopolitical discourse (which, standing alone, can be faulted on the grounds outlined in this section) by contrasting it with the political geographical imaginations of people in the Ferghana Valley.

An ethnography of Ferghana Valley boundaries

Methodology

Having made a case for ethnographic participant observation to be considered in the critical geopolitical study of international boundaries, the remainder of this article seeks to demonstrate its utility by presenting an empirical example. It will draw out the discrepancies between elite and local geopolitical visions of the Ferghana Valley, emphasising how this tension is experienced in the daily life of borderland dwellers.

Ethnography cannot claim transparency, and researchers must probe how their personal agency influenced research results (Adams, 1999; Herbert, 2000, p. 559; Stoller, 1989). This should not be a rote exercise of ticking off boxes to fulfil some criteria for ‘reflexivity’, but rather to enable other scholars to understand how results were reached so that they can both critically interrogate the work, and improve on it in their own research (Behar, 1996, p. 13).

Between 1995 and 2000 I spent three and half years in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the majority of that time in the Ferghana Valley. Two of those years were passed in the Kyrgyzstani border city of Osh, shifting residence and work patterns between the city’s main ethnic groups, Uzbek and Kyrgyz, whose languages I learnt. I lived with local families and friends, teaching at universities, studying languages, and working with local news media outlets and other organisations. These activities left plenty of time for enjoying extensive social networks.

My ethnographic approach was based on a twofold conception of ‘the field.’ The first was the routine experience of living in relatively small communities (for example, a village neighbourhood on the outskirts of Osh) on a day-to-day basis. The second ‘field’ was more dispersed and dynamic. I travelled frequently throughout the Ferghana Valley, mainly by bus, minibus, and the cars that ply between towns. I learnt much from the conversations *en route*, which almost invariably (from February 1999 onwards) turned naturally towards the border and experiences of crossing it. I travelled lightly and inconspicuously, my timetable open ended, staying with people I met along the way, open to chance encounters and unexpected invitations. In doing this, I attempted to take seriously Stoller’s (1989, p. 22) call for an ‘ethnography of detours following the researcher’s intuitions’. Having arrived in the Valley in 1995, I made extensive tours throughout the spring and summer of 1996, and repeated most of these journeys at least once in the spring and summer of 2000. During this time the experience of nation–state and border changed immensely. I felt these changes keenly for myself, shocked at suddenly being unable to cross borders that were previously barely noticeable, frightened at falling victim to a new visa regime introduced unawares and being expelled, deeply saddened at no longer being able to visit friends a few miles away over the boundary.

My own emotional involvement gave me some empathy for what those who lived along the border were experiencing. However, my personal trajectories were, of course, different from those of the average border dweller, because I was there by choice not birth, and could easily leave anytime I wanted to.⁷ Nor was the economic well-being of my family affected by border closures — which probably inclined me to place less emphasis on economic questions. Furthermore, my sympathies were with those crossing borders not those policing them. An ethnography of customs officials or border guards would no doubt lead me to construct a very different account to that which is presented here. In terms of mobility, as a single young British male who spoke Uzbek and Kyrgyz, I could easily travel in new places and stay without fear with strangers who were interested in this novelty. An unaccompanied British female would quite likely place herself in danger of sexual harassment in similar circumstances, and a Russian male researcher would have probably encountered more indifference. Different researchers with different focuses would produce ethnographies different to that here.

As a result, this article does not inflate its claims. It is but one glimpse into a moment when the states of the Ferghana Valley started genuinely to *feel* like different countries for those living alongside their boundaries. It was when elite political geographical imaginations of regulated boundaries enclosing national spaces began to impinge significantly upon borderland life. The legal truth of independence caught up with the experiential truths of borderland life, as the ‘political geographic time-lag’ between them was collapsed. The following sections spotlight this moment, drawing attention to the dynamic interconnectedness of the pre-1999 boundary region, the violence of attempts to impose a new control regime on this dynamic, local political geography, and the everyday contestation and circumvention of these measures.

Pre-1999 interconnectedness of boundary region

Ethnographic work impressed upon me at every turn how interconnected the Ferghana Valley borderlands were in the Soviet and immediate post-Soviet period. Economic, linguistic and social geographies were not coterminous with the formal political geography of independence. The borderlands were populated by people located within dense transboundary social networks and who have lived, worked or studied over the boundary. The previous extent of practical impingement of the border in remoter areas is demonstrated by the Kyrgyz–Tajik boundary at Kara-Bak/Lyakkan, in the South West of the Valley. Cycling along the border zone (Fig. 2), I was unable to locate practical evidence of it on the ground. During conversation, a Lyakkan resident pointed to an animal standing nonchalantly in the midday heat, and told me that, ‘Kyrgyzstan is on the other side of that donkey!’ (Fig. 3).

The village of Arosat⁸ yields no clearer example of the inapplicability to the Ferghana Valley of the idea of clearly defined nation–states. It straddles the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan boundary at the eastern end of the Valley, although what that means in practice is unclear. It was unclear to the inhabitants, who reported that two thirds of the 60-odd households were Uzbek and one third Kyrgyz, and who debated the exact position of the border with me and each other as we stood in the street discussing it during a visit in summer 2000. At some points it seemed that the border ran down the middle of the road, elsewhere it veered away from it.

⁷ I am grateful to Steve Legg for highlighting this to me.

⁸ In order to respect an assurance given to villagers, the name of this village has been changed.



Fig. 2. Boundary between Kyrgyzstan's Batken and Tajikistan's Leninabad oblasts outside Kara-Bak village.

However, nationality was even harder to delineate than territory. Unlike areas of the Valley where Uzbek–Kyrgyz relations had been strained since inter-communal tensions in 1990 (see footnote 4), people claimed that there had been no conflict then in Arosat, that intermarriage occurs, that both groups attend each others' funerals, weddings, etc. The notion of a clear



Fig. 3. Lyakkan village, Tajikistan: 'This is Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstan is on the other side of that donkey.'

historical ethnic division of peoples that is so important to discourses of national independence in Central Asia, and the suture along which the 1990 disturbances occurred, was shown by a little genealogical digging to be more fragile. Some Kyrgyz in the village traced their lineage to Kypchaks, one of the many ethnic groups formally abolished by the categories of modern censuses, yet which maintains a spectral presence as an ethnic category. Likewise, some Uzbeks knew that their family had come from Kashgar (in Xinjiang/Chinese occupied Eastern Turkistan), from people now generally known as Uighurs.

But even more than territory and nation, the border of the functional *state* was highly contorted. Many people had moved employment and residence backwards and forwards between states over their lifetimes. Water was provided from Uzbekistan, electricity from Kyrgyzstan. For example, down the same side of one street, the inhabitants of four alternate houses had alternate citizenships: the first and third Uzbekistani, the second and fourth Kyrgyzstani. Those whose inhabitants had Uzbekistani citizenship sent their children to a school in the next village in Uzbekistan, and received post and pension from, paid tax to, and did military service in the army of, Uzbekistan. Likewise, for those with Kyrgyzstani citizenship, Kyrgyzstan provided those services and demanded those loyalties. Some people set their clocks to Uzbekistani time, others to Kyrgyzstani (there was a one hour difference in the summer, an innovation of independence that the Kyrgyzstani government announced in 2005 that it would abolish). Some houses had two clocks on display, each showing one of the time regimes.

One retired farmer to whom I spoke was Kyrgyz, yet wore a *doppi*, the type of prayer hat that is regarded as a signifier of Uzbekness in some areas of the Valley, such as Osh. He was an Uzbekistani Kyrgyz, his wife a Kyrgyzstani Kyrgyz. He was a citizen of Uzbekistan, but his house appeared to be in Kyrgyzstan's territory. Some of his 10 children worked in Uzbekistan, others in Kyrgyzstan. His own citizenship was a matter of indifference to him, and he regarded the border as 'pointless.' My questions about what postal service and time zone he used did not impress him: he said they have no clock, and get no post, and he showed impatience that I thought such things were relevant. These answers amused others in the group, as did my bewildered attempts to establish some order and demarcate Uzbek and Kyrgyz, Uzbekistani and Kyrgyzstani. 'Here no one talks about Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan,' laughed one person, a sentiment many people repeated to me in different forms.

This liminal space where nation, territory and state were not coterminous rendered nation–state building programmes artificial, even absurd. The post-Soviet boundary region was porous, and its social geography dynamically interconnected. However, the ominous construction of a new Uzbekistani customs post, a visit by boundary cartographers, and the recent exclusion of non-citizens from the Uzbekistani school which had forced the local Kyrgyzstani school to admit Uzbek children and open Uzbek-language classes, are indications that the national states were attempting to assert political geographic order on such communities.

The violence of border closures

The fluidity of the boundary region outlined above was attacked and eroded on multiple fronts in 1999–2000, accelerating the slow uncoupling of valley states that began in 1991. Fanned by excited and often sensationalist debate in the Kyrgyz press, 'border closures' were the topic of innumerable discussions and altercations that I overheard wherever I went during this period. This had not been the case previously. Rumours, stories, information, and anecdotes about border controls, unrest across the border, future visa regimes, and corruption and extortion by officials circulated throughout the Kyrgyzstani part of the Valley. But it

was in those areas immediately on the boundary that the violence of the border closures was most keenly felt.

The small agricultural village of Jar, straddling the Uzbekistan/Kyrgyzstan border near Marhamat and Aravan (Fig. 1), highlights the cartographic violence of the new border regime upon the Ferghana Valley. Jar essentially consists of one straight road with a few dozen houses, one school, one mosque and one cemetery. The inhabitants belong to a single ethnic group (Uzbek), and families are closely inter-related. In these ways, Jar is typical of villages throughout the region. What sets Jar apart, however, is that the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan border cuts through the middle of the village. This abstract line had not been important until autumn 1999, when the Uzbek state suddenly put up concrete posts and strung a barbed-wire fence along it (Fig. 4). A checkpoint was positioned some 200 m up into Uzbekistani territory.

The shock, disbelief and anger of people who gathered at border and who were speaking to me just after this incident is hard to convey. It seemed difficult for people to accept that their leaders had done this. One inhabitant, Dilshot,⁹ exclaimed:

Why our states and *padeshahs* [emperors, rulers] are not sorting this out amongst themselves, I don't know. How will they resolve this? Just think – that such a thing should happen to towns so closely connected as this!

Such direct criticism of the leader commonly came uncomfortably to Uzbeks in the Ferghana Valley at this time, and so this reveals a sense of betrayal but also of genuine astonishment. The closure violated the practice of their kinship networks that formed an integral part of meaning and orientation in the world: 'This person has an elder brother, that a younger brother, this a father, that a daughter-in-law – its hard. Everyone lives mixed in with each other,' said Farhod, another resident. The point was stressed again and again by different people, both Uzbekistanis and Kyrgyzstanis, that everyone here lived inseparably mixed together and the fence showed that the authorities did not understand that. If they could, perhaps it would somehow be different, they implied.

Sadulla, living now on the Uzbekistani side of the border but who had formerly lived on the Kyrgyzstani side, told me that his parents still lived on the Kyrgyzstan side. One of his neighbours teased him, saying, 'So what will you do, call out 'o-hoy' over the fence to your father!?' There was nervous laughter all round, expressive of the absurdity of this tiny village being spliced in two. Similarly, I often found throughout the border region that the idea of Kyrgyzstanis or Uzbekistanis being foreigners (*chet eldikter/chet elliklar*) in the neighbouring states was greeted with an abstract affirmation, yet also immense hilarity. They *were* legally foreigners, and borders, visas and checkpoints were slowly imposing a realisation of this upon them. However, it was still too strange and ludicrous a concept to grasp: I, the Englishman, was a foreigner, not they.

Villagers hotly disputed the reasons for, and the rights and wrongs of, Uzbekistan's imposition of the new fence. Some accused Uzbekistan's President Karimov of being a dictator, others said he was defending the interests of his people. Comparative reforms and living conditions were assessed in both states, and someone said that this division was inevitable following 'democracy'. The inhabitants of Jar were in a state of shock and panic as they speculated about the future. A small break in the fence had been left to allow people to cross, but people told me that the Uzbekistani soldiers had said that they were planning to demolish a lone house at this break

⁹ Names of individuals have been changed throughout.



Fig. 4. Uzbekistan's barbed-wire border fence, Jar village.

and complete the barricade.¹⁰ Other rumours abounded, for example, that the only corridor to allow them to pass would be through far-away Honabad or Dostuk, and even then a rumoured visa regime would oblige the acquisition of passes from Osh or even Bishkek. The rupture in political geographical imagination was immense; a few seconds walk they had been making all their lives now conceivably taking days, involving vastly increased distances by car or even plane, and costing large sums of money that most people did not have. People stressed the absurdity of this imaginary journey to visit family living only metres away in the same village.

I had first visited this area in 1997, when the border was all but invisible. Had the anomalies of different states' property being located in each other's territories, and the irrigation canal winding in and out of both countries, not been pointed out to me, I would have been unaware of the existence of an international boundary. But in the autumn of 2000, walking around a few kilometres of border now closed off to cars, manned by guards extorting money at new or reinforced checkpoints and with children being turned away from schools, the existence of separate nation—states impinged strongly on daily life for the first time. What had previously been largely a legal reality had now become a brute fact, a brute fence.

Needless to say, this violent imposition of a new political geography onto the Ferghana Valley was experienced in deeply emotional and embodied ways. Indeed, it was the inscription of this reality on the bodies of two young male Osh Uzbeks that forced them painfully to confront the geopolitical reality of separate nation states, a reality that they had striven to resist and deny up until 1999.

¹⁰ Six years later, in April 2006, this threat had still not materialised.

Whilst relaxing over a meal and watching Uzbek television with the first, Oybek, he looked pained and suddenly asked me to turn it off. The programme showed music videos made by attractive and fashionable young Uzbekistani pop-stars, part of a sophisticated new cultural scene in Tashkent.¹¹ He said he could not bear seeing what was happening in Uzbekistan, whilst being excluded from it. Some years earlier, he had tried to move to Uzbekistan to study and gain citizenship, but had been refused permission. However, the single incident that upset him more than any other was being intrusively body searched by Uzbekistani border guards. This degrading activity, compounded by the condescending officiousness of the guards, distressed and humiliated him so much that it made him feel unwelcome in the land he had once looked to as a guarantor of the future.

Secondly, I opened my door late one night to another friend, Zamirjon, and was shocked to find him covered in mud and blood. He had been apprehended by a border foot patrol while smuggling, bringing simple goods over the boundary that were necessary for his work but which he could not easily take across customs posts. A fight ensued, and the man escaped from his captors – and although injured, he was certainly lucky to escape with such light injuries as he did. I of course helped clean him up and dress his wounds, and as I did so he reflected angrily on Uzbekistan and contemporary politics. He said that he regretted all the efforts he had made over the years through education and work to find a place for himself in Uzbekistan, because Uzbekistan had finally rejected him. He also reflected negatively on the future of Osh Uzbeks like himself, his mind going back to the 1990 fighting and the ambiguous position of Uzbeks at the cusp of the two states:¹² ‘If there is another war,’ he said, ‘and we go to the Kyrgyz, they will shoot us. But if we go to the Uzbeks, they will shoot us too!’ Through the dirt, blood, and bruises inflicted on his body at the border, he finally came to accept the process of separation which had caused him much existential angst over the years, and to realise that there was no concerned ethnic patron over the border. Far from offering him security, the militarised boundary had proved both an immediate bodily danger, yet also represented, as he saw it, a more profound threat to the community with which his fate was tied.

For both these men, a traumatic border-crossing incident was the catalyst that led to a sea change in their imagination of Ferghana Valley political geographies. As Donnan and Wilson argue, the border is an unusual liminal space of body politics where normal conventions of bodily and personal privacy are suspended and violated (Donnan & Wilson, 1999, p. 131). For each man, the long struggle to define a sense of belonging and identity in space was brought to a head by a border incident that inflicted humiliation or pain on their bodies, suggesting to them that their future, if it lay anywhere, was not to be found in Uzbekistan.

Kinship – an alternative political geographic imagination

It has been argued thus far that Uzbekistani border control policies in 1999 and 2000 exerted violent pressure to force a new political geographic imagination of nation—states on the porous Ferghana Valley borderlands, hyper-accelerating a process of gradual differentiation that began with formal independence in 1991. However, the term ‘political geographical imagination’ is an etic category (see p. 626 of this article) derived from anglophone political geography. For borderland populations, *kinship* practices were the framework used to explain and assess new

¹¹ See Megoran (2005a, p. 564), for further information about pop music in Uzbekistan.

¹² This description of Osh Uzbeks is borrowed from Liu (2002).

political developments. Indeed, this paper will argue that such emic geographies of kinship practice are examples of the ‘alternative boundary narratives’ and representation of space and identity that Newman and Paasi (1998, p. 197) have called for. That is not to posit kinship as a pre-modern remnant in opposition to the modernity of the nation state. Both are connected to notions of Uzbekness and Kyrgyzness that are indelibly marked by Soviet modernity, yet the border crisis pitted the two against each other.

The performance of expected duties of sons to parents is valorised in both Uzbek and Kyrgyz cultural norms. These duties extend to honouring the memory of the dead by holding memorial feasts and prayers. For many Valley Kyrgyz, genealogical knowledge of seven generations of forefathers is regarded as prerequisite to genuine Kyrgyzhood, and the recitation of narratives of their lives ties the living into complicated networks of meaning extending back in time and out through the spaces over which ancestors moved.¹³ Land in which forefathers lived or were buried is hallowed, a place where prayers are said at set intervals to remember the dead and, according to some people’s understandings, pacify departed spirits. This enables a comprehension of the following transcription from the above discussion at Jar. A father, Jamid, and son, Azizbek, who are neighbours on the same street, now found themselves technically living in different countries divided by a barbed-wire fence. The conversation turned to the separation of half the village from its cemetery. Others joined in at this point:

Nick Megoran, ‘When there is a death, where will you do burials?’

Mirzaim, (laughing at madness of it, in disbelief)—‘All our forefathers are over there, everyone’ [general agreement]

Ulugbek, ‘They have told us that that is it, we can’t bury there any more’

Mirzaim, ‘We are shocked, will we even be able to get across? You know it is important for us at *hayits*¹⁴ to go to the cemetery, to our fathers’ [surprise and disbelief]

I provide an unedited transcript of my field notes, including my original remarks on reactions, to attempt to convey the emotion expressed. A policy so at odds with what was fundamental to daily life was more inexplicable than reprehensible. It simply could not be true.

The relationship between brothers, other male relatives or respected friends of differing ages (*aka-uka* in Uzbek and *ake-ikö* in southern Kyrgyz dialects) is a very important one for Ferghana Valley males, being a kinship relation that is integral to social organisation. When describing the harm done by the border, men would intone in frustration and exasperation that ‘our *aka-uka* are on that side!’. Women would more commonly say ‘relatives’ to express the same idea. For them, it was generally expected that they transfer their primary loyalty to the husband’s family upon leaving their parental home for marriage, and there existed no similar feminised kinship term conveying the same importance.

Likewise, marriage relationships were almost invariably referred to in discussion about the border. The phrase, ‘we give our daughters, we take their daughters’, referring to the exchange of women in communally arranged marriage bargains that create or cement new and enduring bonds between families, was used innumerable times around the border area to describe the cross-border connections. Women and men, Uzbek and Kyrgyz, employed it to express how

¹³ These networks can be efficacious in securing position and access to economic resources, part of the phenomenon dubbed ‘tribalism’ in Kyrgyzstan (Gullette, 2002).

¹⁴ Periodic religious festivals, for example, to mark the end of Ramadan or Abraham’s offering of his son to God.

ridiculous and damaging the border regime was. It revealed a deep fear for the future, that the very fabric of everyday social practice would be undone. The gendered obligations and responsibilities of kinship networks were the primary locus for interpreting the unfolding border crisis of 1999–2000 in the rural border area. The border closures were a violent cartographic imposition of the political geographical vision of territorial nation—states over the more meaningful mental maps of the social geography of kinship.

Contestation and subversion along the border

Anthropologists of politics hold that ‘the state’ is not ‘a thing’, but its activities and effects are complex and dispersed and thus can usefully be interrogated ethnographically (Hansen & Stepputat, 2001a, p. 16). Similarly, it is analytically restrictive to conceive of ‘the state’ as a simple given entity when discussing control of Ferghana Valley boundaries, despite the brute fact of the imposition of a militarised enforcement regime. As Megoran, Raballand, and Bouy-jou (2005c) argue, the willingness of border guards and customs officers to receive informal payments to allow unregistered goods and people to pass across creates a boundary best conceived of as a shifting dynamic, rather than a static entity. Sometimes smugglers seek to outwit guards, sometimes guards and smugglers work together; guards seek to both supplement their incomes through extra-legal payments, and demonstrate their industry and loyalty by apprehending smugglers.

The account of the Ferghana Valley 1999–2000 border crisis in this article is one of violence and pain, but it would be a mistake to suggest that borderland dwellers were simply passive victims of a totalising power. On the contrary, they actively sought imaginative ways to circumvent the new obstacles, whether by forming temporary alliances with border guards or by evading them.

The physical blockading of a bridge at one Jalal-Abad—Andijon border village meant that Kanybek, a Kyrgyzstani who worked in Uzbekistan, was no longer able to drive to work. He overcame this obstacle by keeping his car, with Uzbekistani number plates, at a friend’s house on the Uzbekistani side of the border, and every morning crossing the border on foot and driving to work. At another section of the same boundary, a new Uzbekistani checkpoint harassed people taking animals up to the traditional pasture grounds in the Kyrgyz mountains, so herders secreted them through someone’s garden. In June 2000 I crossed the unmarked border from Tajikistan into Kyrgyzstan’s Batken oblast (region), and helped Elmyra, a woman I met, with her bags. She explained that she and her husband were farmers, but to help make ends meet she transported cheap household goods from Tajikistan, bypassing border controls, to mark up a few *som* and sell them in the market in Kyrgyzstan. At every point throughout the borderlands, people could be found outwitting the customs regime through petty smuggling or larger-scale organised crime.

Whilst the spectacle of a herd of cows being quietly smuggled across an international border through someone’s back yard may seem amusing, it is such attempts to outsmart new rules that scholars have termed, perhaps somewhat romantically, ‘resistance’. As such actions are motivated primarily by a desire to protect livelihoods and ways of living, they should not be interpreted as indicative of an explicit political commitment to subvert the established order.¹⁵

¹⁵ Furthermore, as Nugent argues in his study of smuggling at the Ghana–Togo boundary, ‘It is problematic to interpret smuggling as resistance to the existence of the border when the benefits associated with the one could not exist without the other’ (Nugent, 2002, p. 265).

Yet Donnan and Wilson argue that the symbolic import of what they term the ‘subversive economy’ cannot be reduced merely to cheating states of revenue. Rather, such activities threaten to subvert state institutions by compromising the ability of these institutions to control their self-defined domain. Such activities do not play by state rules. They ignore, contest and subvert state power (Donnan & Wilson, 1999, p. 48).

An important element in circumventing and manipulating border rules was the exchange of information. In buses, tea-rooms, bazaars and homes the exchange of stories, anecdotes, rumours and experiences helped build up detailed local knowledge about which checkpoints were ‘softer’ than others and the best tactics to use to negotiate them. Although such knowledge was fragmentary and contingent, reflecting the uncertain nature of the border regimes in 1999 and 2000, and even though it could verge on the mythical, especially when questions of narcotics or insurgency were involved, it enabled traders and travellers to maximise their profits. It also inculcated an ‘us–them’ idea of ongoing conflict between populace and officialdom, and challenged any notion that the Uzbek state had succeeded in fully imposing its will on the cross-boundary circulation of goods, money and people. Elite visions of the importance of tightly controlled boundaries demarcating national entities were not only not shared by borderland dwellers, but actively contested.

Conclusion

As I walked near the border in rural Jalal-Abad in the spring of 2000, a villager angry at Uzbekistan’s construction of its obtrusive perimeter fence said to me that ‘Hitler made barbed-wire fences.’ Such reactions contest portrayals by the Uzbekistani government of the boundary fortifications as a reasonable act of national defence, and the arguments of nationalists in Kyrgyzstan who clamoured for the same. In a brief moment between 1999 and 2000, post-Soviet time was hyper-accelerated by the belated imposition of the cartographic logic of ethnic nation–states onto the existing social geographies of kinship practice in the Ferghana Valley. The legal–constitutional division of the Valley in 1991 only ‘caught up’ with borderland dwellers in 1999. The traumatic collapsing of this ‘political geographical time-lag’ forced them to grasp for the first time that Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan really were two separate, foreign, countries, and that they could no longer belong to or move between both with the same ambiguity.

There are three main disciplinary implications to be drawn from this study.

Firstly, as far as Central Asian studies are concerned, this paper stresses that it was not that tightly controlled international boundaries naturally followed the creation of independent states with separate national identities. On the contrary, in border areas, the feeling of dwelling in one state alongside a different one was actually a *product* of the border closures. In this sense, it may be said that the national reordering of space in the Ferghana Valley is not a product of nations, but is creating them.¹⁶

Secondly, critical political geographers can profitably make use of ethnographic participant observation in their research. The complementary approaches of discursive analysis of geopolitical texts and detailed ethnographic investigation can map striking discrepancies between elite and popular political geographical imaginations. Findings thus derived question and

¹⁶ An argument that Sahlins makes about the role of the Cerdanya Valley in the emergence of modern French and Spanish identities (Sahlins, 1998).

discredit techniques of legitimising state violence, and have the advantage over purely textual critiques of not being solely the creation of academics.

Thirdly and finally, although discursive and technical studies of international boundaries are progressing well, they would benefit by the opening of new research directions. This paper argues that one such departure can be provided by a renewed focus on the experience of borderland life as illuminated by ethnographic participant observation.

In spring 2000, I visited the village of Turkabad on the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan boundary. An enraged man, when he was told that I had come from England to learn about the border, looked me in the eye, pointed his finger straight at me, and said, ‘That’s very good – you go and tell the world what they are doing to us here!’ I promised him that I would, and this article is an attempt to honour that undertaking by depicting, ‘a sense of what it is like to live in other worlds, a taste of ethnographic things’ (Stoller, 1989, p. 156). But that is not merely for taste’s sake. Boundary control regimes in the Ferghana Valley have inflicted unnecessary harm on its inhabitants, and this story has been repeated at borders across the world. An ethnographically informed critical political geography must, in my opinion, therefore commit itself to, ‘trying to think around and against borders’ (Sidaway, 2002, p. 140), and the goal of a world of ‘open borders’ (Hayter, 2004).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the helpful comments on my doctoral work, from which this material is drawn, by the late Graham Smith, Alan Ingram, Deniz Kandiyoti, Sarah Radcliffe, and Piers Vitebsky. Comments by three anonymous referees and the editor were also extremely useful in improving the paper. As ever, I am thankful to Ian Agnew for making the map. The Economic and Social Research Council supported me throughout my research. I am also grateful to both Sidney Sussex College and The Dudley Stamp Memorial Trust for additional research funding, and to the Royal Geographical Society for awarding me the Violet Cressey–Marcks Fisher Travel Scholarship 1998.

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