

## Boris Pétric

**Madeleine Reeves. *Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014. 312 pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-4997-0.**

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The British social anthropologist Madeleine Reeves offers a fascinating book, both in terms of the data it contains and the issues it raises. Engaging a qualitative approach to studying the border in post-Soviet Central Asia, she examines more broadly the metamorphosis of the contemporary state. She first reminds us that administrative boundaries between Soviet republics are part of a political context developed during a period where the “scientific state” distinguished spaces and groups and transformed identities by using social sciences and statistics. This complex inheritance is now managed in a new context, where the nation-state appears as the global political norm and tries to match ethnic/national boundaries with political boundaries. Indeed, these new borders hold a completely different meaning after post-Soviet independence. Reeves, fluent in Russian and Kyrgyz, conducted long periods of fieldwork in Central Asia. She offers a sophisticated analysis of the perceptions and practices of the population living in the Fergana Valley, where borders of three independent states (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan) separate three different societies. She does not consider the border as a natural or static reality, nor as spatially deterministic. Through her high quality description, the border becomes a multiple and plastic reality, and the “border area” appears as major political site.

Since their independence, Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan have claimed different conceptions of the role of the state. On the one hand, Uzbek political power considers itself a kind of post-Soviet state, which still aims to regulate all sectors of social life. Its bureaucracy is designed to assert strong control over the society and relationships with the outside world. On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan has chosen the so-called neoliberal option in which the state is disengaged from many arenas of social life and opens its borders to various circulations. This opposition has led to extensive literature mostly categorizing these societies as authoritarian as opposed to liberal, democratic as opposed to dictatorial, strong as opposed to weak states.

The work of Madeleine Reeves challenges these approaches through a deep immersion in the social complexity of Uzbek and Kyrgyz societies. The quality of the description opens up an understanding of the state as different political forms in process. She analyzes social practices that constantly shape the reality of the state. Her ethnographic observation of the border zone describes a permanent negotiation via complex clientelistic ties between officials and populations, which organize the

circulation of people and goods. She analyzes two contradictory trends: militarization, suggesting the growing reach of centralizing state power, and the use of social strategies to overcome obstacles created by the state.

Reeves pays particular attention to the Kyrgyz side, where the state has withdrawn from the economy by privatizing its production system and multiplying its engagements with the outside world. These reforms highlight a key role of the border in the new Kyrgyz social context: many goods are imported and a large part of the population travels abroad for jobs and resources. One of the consequences of this is the emergence of a major political site linked to the governance of the border: the marketplace, bazaar, resulting from the liberalization of trade ties with China. The Kyrgyz bazaars become a key sociopolitical site where new forms of social mobility and concentration of wealth are possible. In contrast, the bazaar does not play this significant role in Uzbekistan. Tashkent maintains strong controls over marketplaces and has even repressed emerging social figures related to the development of the marketplace.

Reeves's book opens up a more general theoretical reflection on the metamorphosis of contemporary political spaces. Her work follows the anthropological perspective engaged by Akhil Gupta (2012) or Marc Abélès (2008), both of whom challenge the mainstream approach of political scientists who consider the current transformation of the state by measuring sovereignty in quantitative terms. Gupta and Abélès analyze the state through the displacement of sovereignty and criticize a typology that consists of classifying states as weak or strong.

Indeed, in debates among Central Asian specialists Uzbekistan has long been considered a strong state and Kyrgyzstan a weak one. These normative approaches contribute little to knowledge of these political systems and are theoretically misguided attempts to understand how they organize sovereignty and create legitimacy for the political structure. In contrast, Reeves's ethnography reveals the state through social practices on its margins, analyzing concrete bureaucratic actions in the border zones. She shows that goods, people, and ideas continue to cross the borders. However, the difference between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan lies in the role of bureaucracies (customs, police, army) as "brokers" facilitating these border crossings. From this perspective, the border creates a situation of bargaining, which can be a key resource for reproducing or subverting the social order.

The book starts with a description of the transformation of the Batken region, which has undergone many socioeconomic transformations over the course of precolonial, colonial, and Soviet history. Reeves supports her analysis by engaging in a dialogue with anthropologists who studied border areas in other parts of the world and opens a discussion with classical literature (Sahlins 1989; Van Bruinessen 2003).

Reeves continues by revisiting the historic construction of ethnicity within the scientific state through the perspective of ethnic identity and its relation to space. She evokes the changing political context, the importance of the current discourse of national governments on identity, and also the actions of NGOs and international institutions with a strong presence in the area. She then analyzes the new mobility,

including the hundreds of thousands of people who regularly work in Russia. Chapters 3 and 4 contain a detailed description of the ambiguous experience for Kyrgyz in Moscow and provide lively narratives that help to understand how these individuals live this experience, in which they do not sever their ties with Kyrgyzstan but rather leave bad conditions temporarily in the hope of organizing a better return. The author focuses on the popular narratives of the border, but could pay more attention to the sociological analysis of border traffic to bring out more that the state is not an abstract and distant entity but is materialized by bureaucracies embedded in complex social interactions.

The core of the book is chapter 5, which is devoted to the analysis of social figures embodying life related to the border. Through a series of portraits, we understand how the border plays a key role in new social relations. This section raises major questions related to how we might build a better understanding of the difference between the Uzbek and Kyrgyz political realms and challenges all researchers interested in current political developments in Central Asian societies: Why do political figures such as Bajaman Erkinbaev, the *bazarkom* (owner of bazaar) described in the book, appear only on the Kyrgyz side and are absent in Uzbekistan? What does this mean in terms of governmentality?

Although the author evokes the presence of NGOs, an analysis of the international institutional presence on the border is absent. The author refers to her own involvement in a United Nations Development Program project on border issues and could have included insights from this experience to develop an additional very important dimension: How does the coproduction of transnational and international authorities transform the role of the state? Such transformations can be observed in many other regions and should be studied. In the same light, Reeves's involvement in a development project aiming to engage in social change could have nourished the reflexive dimension of her anthropology.

Despite these minor critiques, this remarkable work convincingly describes the nature of social and political boundaries affecting the distribution of resources and, therefore, opens up multiple reflections on social realities that have changed significantly over the past twenty years. After an avalanche of highly prescriptive and superficial literature, this book offers the opportunity to enter into the complexity of the social realm. This book absolutely must be read, not only by central Asian specialists but also by researchers working on the metamorphosis of contemporary states elsewhere in the world.

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