

Symbolism and Power in Central Asia

Politics of the Spectacular

Edited by
Sally N. Cummings



Routledge Europe-Asia Studies Series

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Symbolism and Power in Central Asia

With the collapse of communism, post-communist societies scrambled to find meaning to their new independence. Central Asia was no exception. Events, relationships, gestures, spatial units and objects produced, conveyed and interpreted meaning. The new power container of the five independent states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan would significantly influence this process of signification. Post-Soviet Central Asia is an intriguing field to examine this transformation: a region which did not see an organised independence movement develop prior to Soviet implosion at the centre, it provokes questions about how symbolisation of a new political container begins in the absence of a national will to do so.

The transformation overnight of Soviet republic into sovereign state provokes questions about how the process of communism-turned-nationalism could become symbolised, and what specific role symbols came to play in these early years of independence. Characterized by authoritarianism since 1991, the region's ruling elites have enjoyed disproportionate access to knowledge and to deciding what, how and when that knowledge should be applied. The first of its kind on Central Asia, the study not only widens our understandings of developments in this geopolitically important region but also contributes to broader studies of representation, ritual, power and identity.

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Symbolism and Power in Central Asia

Politics of the Spectacular

Edited by Sally N. Cummings

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Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	vi
1. Inscapes, landscapes and greyscapes: the politics of signification in Central Asia <i>Sally N. Cummings</i>	1
2. Legitimising Central Asian authoritarianism: political manipulation and symbolic power <i>Anna Matveeva</i>	12
3. Nation branding in Central Asia: a new campaign to present ideas about the state and the nation <i>Erica Marat</i>	39
4. Searching for <i>Kamalot</i> : political patronage and youth politics in Uzbekistan <i>Eric M. McGlinchey</i>	53
5. Michael Romm's <i>Ascent of Mount Stalin</i> : a Soviet landscape? <i>Stuart Horsman</i>	67
6. The art of the impossible: political symbolism, and the creation of national identity and collective memory in Post-Soviet Turkmenistan <i>Michael Denison</i>	83
7. Promising futures? Education as a symbolic resource of hope in Kyrgyzstan <i>Sarah S. Amsler</i>	104
8. Identity, symbolism, and the politics of language in Central Asia <i>William Fierman</i>	122
9. The invention of legitimacy: struggles in Kyrgyzstan to craft an effective nation-state ideology <i>Asel Murzakulova & John Schoeberlein</i>	144
10. Mass spectacle and styles of governmentality in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan <i>Laura L. Adams & Assel Rustemova</i>	164
11. Materialising state space: 'creeping migration' and territorial integrity in Southern Kyrgyzstan <i>Madeleine Reeves</i>	192
12. Tajikistan's virtual politics of peace <i>John Heathershaw</i>	229
<i>Index</i>	251

Inscapes, Landscapes and Greyscapes: The Politics of Signification in Central Asia

SALLY N. CUMMINGS

IN THE POST-COMMUNIST WORLD, KATHERINE VERDERY (1999, p. 25) argues that the fate of famous political corpses helps

us to see political transformation as something more than a technical process—of introducing democratic procedures and methods of electioneering, of forming political parties and nongovernmental organisations, and so on. The 'something more' includes meanings, feelings, the sacred, ideas of morality, the nonrational

Almost 30 years earlier Harold D. Laswell (1971, p. 545) had encouraged 'political science to examine in detail the process of ... symbolization'. This work echoes these concerns; while it does not reject the importance of more traditional political studies, it encourages a broadening of its field to incorporate a study of symbolism in political life.

Symbolism is largely about producing, conveying and interpreting meaning. Language, discourse and image all produce such meaning. Specifically, this collection asks how, why and with what effects politics interacts with aural, visual and linguistic symbols in Central Asia. It reflects how political science can usefully collaborate with other disciplines, particularly cultural, psychological, anthropological and geographical studies, to incorporate the symbolic in its political analysis (Halas 2002). Victor Turner (1966, p. 19) points out how the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* refers to a 'symbol' as a thing 'regarded by general consent as naturally typifying or representing or recalling something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought'. The symbolic observed by various contributors here ranges hugely from objects, activities, relationships, events, to gestures and spatial units.

Post-Soviet Central Asia is an intriguing field to examine this process of signification. A region which did not see an organised independence movement develop prior to Soviet implosion at the centre, it provokes questions about how symbolisation begins in the absence of a national will to do so. An externally imposed collapse of certainty led to a scramble for internally invented signs of certainty. The power container overnight had become a national one. This provokes questions about

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how the process of communism-turned-nationalism could become symbolised, and what specific role symbols came to play in these early years of independence. Second, this period has witnessed, on the one hand, a growing authoritarianism in the region as a whole, and on the other, very different types of authoritarianism between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Questions about links between regime type and symbolisation emerge, such as whether the production of meaning is helped or hindered by stronger authoritarianism; and whether the absence of formal electoral procedures places emphasis on non-electoral forms of buttressing power. Furthermore in an authoritarian system certain elites have disproportionate access to knowledge and to deciding what, how and when that knowledge should be applied.

Theories of (non-)representation

No consensus exists on the relationship between politics and symbols, however. Writers are broadly divided between those who view symbols as representational and those who do not. On the representational side, the study of representation in politics is split into three broad approaches: the reflective, intentional and constructivist approaches (Hall 2007). In simplified terms, reflective approaches mirror or imitate 'really existing' truth (mimesis). Signs bear a relationship to the shape and texture of the objects they represent. Intentional approaches, by contrast, are a function of what the agent wants something to mean; here meaning derives from the goals set by actors. Constructivists also do not deny the existence of the material world but their representation

involves making meaning by forging links between three different orders of things: what we might broadly call the world of things, people, events and experiences; the conceptual world—the mental concepts we carry around in our heads; and the signs, arranged into languages, which 'stand for' or communicate these concepts. (Hall 2007, p. 61)

Ferdinand de Saussure (1959) argued that these links can be made linguistically meaningful by exposing the link between, on the one hand, language codes (*la langue*) and, on the other, different forms of speech used by language (*la parole*). *La parole* refers in the broadest sense to, for example, speech, writing, drawing or other types of representation. These forms of speech he labelled the signifiers and the mental concepts associated with them, the signifieds. As he explains in his *Course in General Linguistics* Part One:

One characteristic of the symbol is that it is never wholly arbitrary; it is not empty, for there is the rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and the signified. The symbol of justice, a pair of scales, could not be replaced by just any other symbol, such as a chariot. (de Saussure 1959, p. 68)

In Saussurian terms, therefore, the signifier (image) plus the signified (concept) equal the sign (meaning). We shall return to the arbitrariness of the symbol in conclusion.

In his study of semiotics, Roland Barthes (1972) built on the work of Saussure by incorporating the role of culture in the encoding, coding and decoding of signs. He referred to the sign as denotation and to connotation when these signs were linked to broader cultural themes. In his essay 'Myth today', Barthes (1972, p. 19) calls connotation a myth. In this reading, he adds,

French imperialism is the very drive behind the myth. The concept reconstitutes a chain of causes and effects, motives and intentions...Through the concept...a whole new history...is implanted in the myth...the concept of French impartiality...is again tied to the totality of the world: to the general history of France, to its colonial adventures, to its present difficulties.

Barthes (1972, p. 114) proceeded to argue that myth was a 'second-order semiological system'. While in a first-order system the Saussurian logic of 'signifier + signified = sign' prevails, in the second-order system, the sign is a mere signifier.

Discourse replaced semiotics with the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault argued that it is impossible to understand symbolism without understanding the particular historic juncture at which the subjects found themselves. The uncovering of 'relations of power' trumped those of 'relations of meaning' (Foucault 1980, p. 115), and these power relations would be reflected in discursive formations (Foucault 1975). Discourse showed what was possible and not possible in language and practice by revealing where meaning originated. Mutually constituent, power and knowledge dictated how ideas came into practice and in turn regulated practice. A Foucauldian analysis of the post-Soviet space is therefore interesting precisely because it would be expected that with Soviet collapse forms of knowledge, objects, subjects and practices of knowledge would be radically altered.

On the non-representational side, debates on symbolism are similarly structured around the relationship between the material and the discursive. They focus on how these two realities interact, if at all. Kertzer and Wedeen both show how practice and meaning are mutually constituent. As David Kertzer (1998, p. 2) writes, 'Politics is expressed through symbolism. Rather little that is political involves the use of direct force, and, though material resources are crucial to the political process, even their distribution and use are largely shaped through symbolic means'. Lisa Wedeen (1999, p. 6) makes the distinction between obedience and compliance: between genuine reverence and citizens acting as though they revere their leader. For Wedeen, symbols assume a political life of their own, becoming mechanisms of domination and enforcement, and this process can be 'paradoxically both self-defeating and self-serving, both inviting transgression and delimiting its content' (Wedeen 1999, p. 31).

For some these symbols are not simply an act: they constitute that very reality. Guy Debord's broad understanding of the term 'spectacle' was informed by such an all-dominant view, and 'cannot be understood as a mere visual deception produced by mass-media technologies. It is a world-view that has actually been materialised, a view of a world that has become objective' (Debord 2006, p. 7). In the terms of Lyotard and Thebaud (1985, p. 41): 'Who are the tribes of interpreters, who are the narrators in this decoding of symbolic landscapes? The narrators are being narrated too, remember'.

Jean Baudrillard (1983, p. 5) unmistakably merges the worlds of the material and discursive, arguing that signifiers become objects in themselves: 'Someone who feigns an illness can simply go to bed and make believe he is ill. Someone who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms'. It is about self-referential production: 'Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum' (1983, p. 11). Ultimately, 'the transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing, marks the decisive turning point' (1983, p. 12). Baudrillard's later work, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995), epitomises this threshold.

As James Der Derian (1995, p. 38) writes, Baudrillard's conclusion that the real disappears into its representational form has

a long lineage. It can be traced from Siegfried Kracauer's chronicling of the emergence of a 'cult of distraction' in the Weimar Republic, to Walter Benjamin's incisive warning of the loss of authenticity, aura, and uniqueness in the technical reproduction of reality, to Guy Debord's claim that, in modern conditions, spectacles accumulate and representations proliferate, and, finally to Jean Baudrillard's own notification that the simulated now precedes and engenders a hyperreality where origins are forgotten and historical references lost.

In the field: evidence and theory, the material and the discursive

Encounters between the material and the discursive have varied substantially in post-Soviet Central Asia. A single theory alone often inadequately captures the complexity of the signification process. Viewing power legitimisation still largely through a Weberian lens, and suggesting primary emphasis on the representational theory of intentionality, Anna Matveeva's contribution to this collection suggests that elites are conscious beings that are able autonomously to produce the mechanisms that keep them in power, and these mechanisms of legitimisation are partly symbolic. Murray Edelman (1985 (first published 1964)) draws attention to the symbolic nature of participation in politics. His argument concentrates on the mechanisms through which politics influences what people want, what they fear, what they regard as possible and even who they are. In these participatory fields, Matveeva argues, Central Asian regimes manoeuvre, often obliged to compete against domestic and external alternative sources of legitimacy.

Externally, communicative strategies by elites target international audiences of various kinds: investors, donors, tourists and sometimes external providers of national security. Erica Marat illustrates how Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have produced largely new brands to sell themselves to the outside world, in contrast with Uzbekistan's relying on the symbolic resources it inherited from the Soviet Union, namely, its famous cities and cultural artefacts which also predate the Soviet Union. Framing suggests the deliberate selection of certain narratives over others and in turn their careful shaping to appeal to domestic and international audiences. Like Matveeva, Marat views images as produced by the ruling elite, and like Matveeva, therefore, sees that elite as a conscious actor whose own images shape the images of the state as a whole.

Although not strictly Weberian in approach, Eric McGlinchey also looks at the primacy of intentional symbolism and at the motivations behind Islam Karimov's attempts to co-opt and mobilise, particularly the *Kamalot* youth group. But unlike Matveeva and Marat, McGlinchey views this group's attendant symbolism as indicative of regime weakness rather than strength. Precisely because symbolism was underestimated, he argues, many Sovietologists failed to appreciate the fundamental weakness of the previous system. In the post-Soviet context, even if it fails to mobilise as in the case of the Uzbek youth, symbolism should be taken seriously, because its hollowness reflects growing authoritarianism as a response to a declining real hold on power. Symbols are not, therefore, reflective of a virtual reality but in fact are a mimesis of actually existing relations. McGlinchey would appear to combine intentional and reflective approaches of symbolism.

As Jacques Derrida (1981) quipped, writing always leads to more writing. The French philosopher argued that difference cannot be accurately expressed within any binary system. The possibility for multiple interpretations is captured by Stuart Horsman and Michael Denison. Symbols must hold meaning to the population to be useful, when they do not, they flounder. Taking an example from the Soviet period, Horsman's analysis of Michael Romm's *The Ascent of Mount Stalin* provides a firsthand account of the planning and progress of the expedition, the climbing of Mount Stalin and the physical and human landscape in which it took place. The 'virtual tourism' (Hirsch 2003) offered by the ascent of the mountain did not sustain the imagination of those reading it, did not enthuse them to 'imagine themselves into the emerging developmentalist narrative of Soviet-sponsored evolution and achievement' (2003, p. 696). This might be compared to those 'Walt Disney characters who rush madly over the edge of a cliff without seeing it: the power of their imagination keeps them suspended in mid-air, but as soon as they look down and see where they are, they fall' (Vaneigem 2006, p. 21).

In Denison's contribution, different interpretations, this time of the past rather than the future, are seen as having shaped Turkmenistan's symbolic landscape under the late President Saparmurat Niyazov. The very possibility of differing interpretations seems foreclosed in the context of that regime's close intertwining of a strong cult of personality (borrowing heavily from Stalin and Atatürk, as well as Turkmen traditions of tribal governance), semi-sultanistic rule (Cummings & Ochs 2001) and elaborate, all-embracing ideologised symbolisation. Even within this tightly controlled narrative, however, the ruling elite seems unable, in Denison's view, to have monopolised meanings, which he interprets as the limiting nature of this early post-Soviet nationalising project. In both Denison's commemoration and Horsman's developmentalist projects, it is suggested, in Saussurian terms, that the signifiers did not signify the same for the elite and the population. In Denison's account the Great Patriotic War has not reached the elite's unquestioned associations that French imperialism had in Roland Barthes' example. In the case of Mount Stalin, the incongruity was less a result of the signified being misinterpreted than the signifier, namely the image of the mountain, whose non-anthropomorphic nature did not conjure up the associations the Soviet regime had hoped it would.

'The Kyrgyzstani university landscape is also a striking example of competing (often borrowed) images, corporate cultures and ideologies influenced by distinctly foreign

dominants (Turkish, American, Russian–Slavonic and Uzbek)'.¹ Sarah Amsler (in this collection) argues that education is a key site for the articulation of social imaginaries and for defining the cultural and political practices through which they may legitimately be realised. She explores how the idea of education in Kyrgyzstan has been articulated within and against wider cultural discourses of Marxism–Leninism and neoliberal capitalism, and discusses how these processes of articulation have shaped the present-day imagination of the futures education might promise, rather in the way Pierre Bourdieu (2001) discussed how the idea of education may become an *idée-force* (an idea which has social force).

Language politics in the four Turkic-speaking republics, as discussed by William Fierman, is another national resource of collective identity. As in the educational sphere, decisions are made with an acute sense of their symbolic significance but within the constraints of what is practically possible and instrumentally desirable. Language policies suggest that symbolism and material concerns operate alongside each other, often in quite different worlds. Although since 1991 the status of Russian in Central Asia (possibly excepting Turkmenistan) has significantly declined, Russian has continued to secure a symbolic niche, largely through its continued widespread practical use. By contrast, when indigenous languages have been used symbolically their implementation has often been sustained because they as yet had not acquired practical relevance. Russian-language tracks in higher education were given up as a real criterion for entry but were kept as a principle, symbolically.

A Foucauldian approach has as its assumption multiple sources of meaning, underscoring how the very subject is produced in discourse. Certain actors at certain periods of history are better placed than others to put ideas into practice; at the same time, however, these ideas then regulate the conduct of these very agents as well as others. In the post-Soviet era language policy elites have often lost their former abilities to be the sole producers, conveyors and, in some cases, consumers of this symbolism. In contributions to this collection, Asel Murzakulova and John Schoeberlein on national ideology, Laura Adams and Assel Rustemova on mass spectacle, and Madeleine Reeves on creeping migration, show how state discourse and practice are mutually constituent.

Murzakulova and Schoeberlein demonstrate how the formation of national ideology in Kyrgyzstan has not been simply about serving the interests of elite ideology producers. Rather, the ideological system is produced by a wide variety of social actors, and, crucially, their interaction has differed under Kyrgyzstan's first two presidents, Askar Akaev and Kurmanbek Bakiev respectively. The mass spectacle, the subject of Adams and Rustemova's analysis, is a different instance of where ideas from below are channelled into popular representations from above and then again interpreted by both above and below. The comparison of mass spectacle in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan also underscores very different approaches to governmentality and, if we add the example of Kyrgyzstan, how symbolism can show us that states in Central Asia differ not just in degree but in type of regime.

The Wittgensteinian blurring of the material and the symbolic assumes analytical purchase in Madeleine Reeves' analysis of 'creeping migration'. Referring to the illegal

¹I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this depiction.

purchase or lease of land and property in Kyrgyzstani border villages by citizens of neighbouring border villages in Tajikistan, Reeves argues that this practice is, on the one hand, both the result of state (and international) discourse on the need for post-Soviet demarcation and state fixing, and the 'creep' of the state border itself, on the other. This reaction is both discursive and material: that is, there has emerged a particular account of threat posed by 'creeping migration' which has tangible material effects. In Hanna Fenichel Pitkin's words, such a blurring of meaning (semantics) and use (pragmatics) ensures that: 'Semantic meaning is compounded out of cases of a word's use, including all the many and varied language games that are played with it; so meaning is very much the product of pragmatics' (Pitkin 1972, p. 54).

Finally, John Heathershaw combines a virtual with a Baudrillardian analysis of symbolism in post-conflict Tajikistan. He argues that international peacebuilding initiatives have created a virtual multi-party system 'constituted of ambiguous authoritarian-democratic signs'. This virtual reality is unrepresentative of existing relations. But the central argument is that the type of symbols chosen has had a real effect on helping to keep peace—even if these symbols do not reflect reality. The suggestion is that this disjuncture works, at least in the short term. In Baudrillard's (1983, pp. 12–13) terms:

When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us—a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence.

Questions ahead

The foregoing analysis of theories of (non-)representation and their application to post-Soviet Central Asia suggests further research avenues: first, the selection, content and function of symbols in cultural strategising; second, different symbolic functions; and, third the links between symbolism and regime type.

Symbols as cultural strategising: from the arbitrary to the unifying

The signification process is intimately linked to cultural stratification. Symbols reflect and infuse the varied strategies of cultural collective identities and discourse that lay claim to operating in the name of 'the nation'. In the absence of a 'wish of nations' (Renan 1990) for independence, symbolism took on specific significance: devoid of visible structural and elite change, symbols assumed added importance. Often signification has preceded narration: symbols in Central Asia have provided an immediate means to narrate the new sovereign nation. The discourse of sovereignty and nationhood had already become part of the *episteme* for these states in the Gorbachev era; that discourse seems to have aided the production of symbols in the newly independent era, itself generating new discourse. The symbols that were chosen

in the early 1990s in Central Asia with few exceptions tended to emphasise the unchanging or the traditional. But at the same time the traditional is often challenged by the desire for the nation to become part of a sovereign globalised world, where images or discourse are not necessarily nationally produced, conveyed or interpreted, as Marat's national branding strategies or Amsler's ideological debates over education portray.

It is, however, misleading to claim that the content of the chosen symbols expresses cultural authenticity or essence. Identity as a process of becoming (Eley & Suny 1996) captures better the nature of a journey that can often be quite arbitrary in the form it ends up adopting. Symbols are often in the grey zone, rather than expressive of a central inner sphere or a specific outer landscape. Narrating is not a historicist, essentialist exercise. It is a practice that is contested at the margins (Bhabha 1990). The post-Soviet experience is most telling at these margins. In other words further explorations are encouraged as much to look at the liminal, the temporal and the counter-narratives as they are at the essentialist, traditional or official narratives.

A note of caution is in order however. Even if symbols can be contingent, arbitrary and everyday, their overall purpose is a unifying one:

Nationalism is not what it seems, and above all not what it seems to itself... The cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical inventions. Any old shred would have served as well. But in no way does it follow that the principle of nationalism... is itself in the least contingent and accidental. (Gellner 1983, p. 56)

Debord (2006, p. 7, italics and capitals in original) similarly refers to a unification process:

Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudo-world that can only be looked at... THE SPECTACLE presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of *unification*.

Even if the Niyazov regime has employed isolated historical moments and symbols, rather than a coherent narrative, to represent Turkmen nationhood, few would contest that its aim was to unify rather than fragment. But these attempts to fixate and reify, however, often do not hold resonance for the population at large. It is, in any case, often as much intended for the elites in their process of self-legitimation (Cummings 2006). For Debord (2006, p. 13, capitals in original) again: 'THE SPECTACLE is the ruling order's non-stop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise, its self-portrait at the stage of totalitarian domination of all aspects of life'.

Symbols and their multiple functions

The varied functions of symbolism explain why they may end up meaningless for the population. Referential, condensation and dominant symbols dot the post-Soviet Central Asian 'scapes'. Referential symbols are 'economical devices for purposes of reference' (Turner 1966, p. 29). These predominantly cognitive symbols were