

Spector, Regine A. *Order at the Bazaar: Power and Trade in Central Asia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 2017. 266 pp. (ISBN-13: 978-1501709326)

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 gave birth to an independent Kyrgyzstan, but at the same time generated an abysmal political quagmire, along with a chaotic social and economic environment in the following transitional decades. The harbinger of confusion reigned across all former Soviet Union republics including Kyrgyzstan.

Regine A. Spector, an associate professor in political science at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in *Order at the Bazaar: Power and Trade in Central Asia*, explores local understandings and traditions in connection to bazaar order in Kyrgyzstan. She looks at *order* from the perspectives of traders, owners, and others who work in the country's bazaars. In the unpredictable and erratic times following the demise of the USSR, Spector scrutinizes a puzzling situation by unraveling how the bazaar maintained a particular type of order. Despite the deterioration of the political and economic conditions of the country, the bazaar was able to stand firm and cope with change much more effectively than other institutions.

Throughout the region, bazaars constitute the fundamental aspects of daily economic activities for the populace. Bazaars are hubs of ambitious and enterprising power in Central Asia. Nevertheless, these aspiring and vigorous marketplaces are also frequently associated with organized crime or illegal economic activities conducted by locals living at the fringe of their society. Spector proffers insight into everyday life at bazaars by showing the reader that, in reality, bazaars have a strict code of conduct and order within a turbulent national context. To this end, Spector examines the role of bazaars in the political economy and development of Central Asia.

Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest countries of the region with minimal economic resources at its disposal. Its land-locked status creates further fragility to external geopolitical and financial shocks, which in turn directly affect the population of the country, including traders. Limited state capabilities and periodic political upheavals combined with an exceptional level of corruption create a fertile environment for more economic decline and degradation of the marketplace. Traders do not have much control, so their survival strategy includes adapting. The author successfully shows the reader the different and ever-changing meanings associated with trading and bazaars within the context of Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan. For instance, during pre-Soviet times, local culture considered trade as unsuitable and irrelevant for the nomadic nature of Kyrgyz people. Notwithstanding, during Soviet times, another layer was added to that already preconceived idea by describing it as illegal or even criminal in some instances.

The massive changes in society, markets, and the economy of the period were traumatic in many ways. However, to overcome governance-related difficulties, the merchants of the bazaar relied not only on already well-embedded Soviet institutions in society such as trade unions but also on rural, nomadic, pre-Soviet local practices such as the authority of the

village elders – literally white beards, or *aksakals* – for the panacea to bring order to the marketplace. Spector investigates the two largest bazaars of Bishkek, namely Dordoi Bazaar and Osh Bazaar. Both symbolize distinct characteristics in terms of their location, leadership, or organizational structure. Indeed, the cultural unmooring of the Soviets and the legacy of *Homo Sovieticus* through ideological indoctrination of the Soviet educational system was instrumental and influential in the establishment of an orderly structure at the bazaar. For instance, although the traders of the bazaar originated from political and economic groups of society other than commerce or business, Spector asserts that it is interesting to discover how those individuals adapted their Soviet-era understandings to organize the bazaar. In crude terms, they reoriented themselves to this new working context to solve problems that they encountered in their new work environment. Moreover, trade unions, albeit having a reputation of being dysfunctional in most third world countries, in the Kyrgyz context, were able to reinvent themselves with a unique positive connotation.

At the end of the book, the author provides robust documentation of all interviews conducted throughout her fieldwork. On methodological grounds, Spector relies on interviews, archival sources, and participant observation to reveal the perplexing nature of the relationship(s) that takes place in the bazaar among various actors to imitate a sound administrative structure. This triangulation of data as a method in this qualitative research most certainly allows checking and establishes the validity of arguments from multiple perspectives and increases the methodological persuasion of the study.

It would be fair to argue that Spector's conclusions have significance and implications well beyond the bazaars of Kyrgyzstan. Most importantly, the dramatic interplay between economic development and the inadequate rule of law can be extended further to other developing countries or transitional countries in the third world.

Spector yields an exceptionally compelling account of the role of the bazaar for political economy and the development studies in Central Asia. It provides many insights about the interconnections between politics, society, and market relations within the context of economic development and governance structures in Central Asia. Most of the literature on Central Asia looks at the region from a geopolitical point of view at the macro level. However, Spector shuffles the political economy focus to the micro level by focusing on everyday people's espousal of trade and commerce. Most certainly, it is a must-read for specialists as well as graduate students focusing on Central Asia and a remarkable addition to Central Asian studies.

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