

Topic:

Understanding Normative Implications of Development as Perceived and Experienced by People in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

Abstract:

This study is embedded within the field of development/international development anthropology. Within different trajectories in this field, I engage with the critical ethnography of development. The reviewed literature indicates that the ethnographies have been situated within two main theoretical lenses. They both circle around distinct ideas/premises and methodological tools. (i) The first one can be defined as “polarized” understanding of development. It provides solid framework within how the uneven relationship between the “West” and its “others” has been understood since the colonial times (Ferguson 1994; Murray Li 2007, 2014; Escobar 2005, 2012; Rahnema and Bawtree 1997; Berman 1982; Shanin 1997). (ii) The second theoretical debate is relatively recent. It tries to problematize the given stable dichotomous frameworks and does so by bringing the notion of “agency” and challenging uneven distribution of power between the two in the context of transnational and transcultural processes (Mosse 2005, 2011; Rottenburg 2009; Rist 2014; Oliver de Sardan 2005).

The given lenses provide accurate and critical description of power relation processes and their validity can't be denied within certain historical periods or current processes at a certain level. Yet, I claim that development is more than just a relationship between “developed” and “to be developed” countries; it is more than transcultural processes and negotiations. These grand narratives have totalizing notions and politically-contested nature of the field/ “development” makes it methodologically difficult to talk about it-in simple terms without taking into consideration different sentiments it brings for different people. This way of engaging in the field diverts the attention from understanding “development” as an overarching normative horizon which has its implications in daily lives; it does not allow to talk about its implications as lived and perceived by different actors without necessarily situating them within contested polarized categories. While informed by these theoretical debates, I do not want to be guided by their totalizing premises for selecting/interpreting/representing my empirical data. I attempt to move away from engaging in development within politicized and polarized understandings. Yet, I attempt carefully engage with the second debate which tries to problematize and go beyond the polarized understanding of development. While it mainly engages with the transnational processes and development cooperation on a certain level with distinct actors; I focus on people's/various actors' ways of perceiving/experiencing and living development. I ask: (a) how development is perceived by people; how different actors talk/experience and make sense of it in personal, and emotional ways; how it shapes their lives and relationships; (b) what are the dynamics which contribute to how people talk/experience development; (c) what their daily fabric of life tells us in addition to power relations? Within 20th century the Kyrgyzstan had to make drastic changes from traditional and religious ways of knowing/relating/being to the Soviet and then to neoliberal market order. Both breaks were accompanied by the denial of earlier forms of knowing/relating/being. Taking into consideration the given background, misunderstandings and mistreatments seem to be unavoidable. The tensions have grown profoundly within “development” driven by neoliberal market logic. The normative demands/standards of acceptance/recognition/integration are leaving many to search for meaning/peace/acceptance in a new encounter with Islam and pre Islamic religious traditions. My

pursuit of understanding normative implications of development through lived experiences/ways of relating/knowing is driven by the very nature of lasting complex and violent social relations lived in the country. Moving beyond political events/narratives and understanding overarching normative horizon of development as perceived by people in the context of their daily lives and relationships allows engaging with the lives of the “subjects” more holistically and informs us about actual processes of adaptation; it gives more truthful description of processes of transformation; it informs us about complexities in coming to terms with development in multi historical contexts; it allows to focus on actual lives rather than focusing on the limitations of the categories/concepts/processes/lenses in field per-se.