

Introduction

Svetlana Jacquesson

American University of Central Asia

In 1986 David William Cohen urged historically minded anthropologists and anthropologically minded historians to engage reflexively with the “lively, critical telling, writing and using of history in settings and times outside the control of the crafts and guilds of academic disciplines” and to take into account the “terrific tide of popular historical literature, produced locally, often in non-Western languages, by individuals and collectivities believing their past, and their histories which tell those pasts, have authority, significance, and meaning” (1994: 5).¹ The contributors to this volume take up this challenge – though belatedly – and present a set of case studies on a broad spectrum of social actors from central and northern Eurasia who engage in the telling, writing and using of history in a variety of cultural and political settings.²

While the idea of a reflexive engagement with the social practices of producing and consuming knowledge about the past in an attempt to broaden the meanings of “history” appealed to all of them, some – especially those who are not historians – felt uneasy with the way “history production” in the sense of Cohen addressed academic practices.³ These contributors believed that “history making” rendered better the types of agency they encountered in their respective fields and the ways they explored these agencies.

“History making” also carries a considerable conceptual baggage. In a recent volume on the ethnography of historicities, Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart – following Hayden White (1987: 1175) – argue that “making history” is a European political and cultural practice firmly embedded in the genesis and development of

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- 1 I would like to thank Nathan Light who provided me with several critical readings of a draft of this introduction, and who offered many a helpful comment on the best ways to situate this volume within the vast field of anthropological and historical discussions of history as a cultural category.
 - 2 The publication of this volume was preceded by a workshop on the same topic held at the Center for Interdisciplinary Area Studies (ZIRS) at Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany, in February 2013. Both the publication and the workshop were made possible by a grant from the Volkswagen Foundation.
 - 3 Cohen used the “production of history” as a frame encompassing both the ways in which social actors process the past and the ways in which academic historians do it. Among the main axes of investigation within this frame he mentioned “the conventions and paradigms in the formation of historical knowledge and historical texts, the patterns and forces underlying interpretation, the contentions and struggles which evoke and produce texts, or particular glosses of texts along with sometimes powerfully nuanced vocabularies, as well as the structuring of frames of record-keeping” (1994: 244-245).

nation-states, and when scholars attribute it to other cultures and societies they may “turn the corner too quickly” (2005: 263). The practices of “history making” analysed in this volume include Uzbek elders’ responding to invitations to remember events such as collectivisation; everyday Uzbeks writing memoirs “to fill in the blank spots” in official history; genealogists hunting for secrets and truths on the past of the Kyrgyz; shamans and academics crafting narratives on the glorious heritage of the Sakhas (previously known as Yakuts); Uyghur and Chinese historians recounting a local peasant rebellion; and Sakha or Kyrgyz citizens discussing history, or relating to the past, during various social events or leisure activities. In most of the cases these social actors engage with the past intentionally and reflexively, and in most of the cases they respond to a certain “demand for a past” (Chakrabarty 2008). A compromise though it may be, “history making” still seems to best capture the practices analysed in this volume because it evokes an active engagement with the past in ways that are useful and make sense to contemporary audiences.

Pasts, histories, reflexivities

Various aspects of “others’ history making,” or of history as a cultural category, have long been on the research agenda of anthropologists, historians and area studies specialists and one can heuristically distinguish at least three different approaches. The “processing of the past” was first problematised as a crucial dimension of expressive culture and there exists a spate of studies on how the past is told in various oral genres, re-enacted in ritual, or “materialised” in artefacts. A common thread through this bulk of research is the recognition that though many societies do not secrete documents and “history,” they still engage with their past and create knowledge about it in a variety of idioms that need to be studied and analysed. These idioms may include gestures, bodily markers, modes of preparing food, dance, musical forms, natural or built landscapes, and even silence. Anthropological studies also emphasise that in many social settings factual accounts of the past do not matter; what matter instead are the meanings the past derives from the present, how it is felt or experienced, or how it “manifests” in the present. Michael Herzfeld (2001: 58, 71-72) suggests that the dynamic relations between present and past are well captured by Victor Turner’s (1974) concept of “social drama.” The study of a society’s engagement with the past becomes then an exploration of its “social dramas” taking place on a daily basis, or on more ritualised occasions. Most recently, Hirsch and Steward have raised the challenge even higher by suggesting that scholars’ attention should not be limited to pasts and presents, but also encompass the futures. They call for an “ethnography of historicities” that shakes away the Western divide between past, present and future and focuses instead on identifying “unforeseen modes and practices through which a community may engage with and produce knowledge about its pasts while anticipating its futures” (2005: 262-263).

A second strand in the study of history making gained momentum in the wake of decolonisation. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008) argues, the need for recognition

of newly independent nations, or formerly oppressed groups within the same nation, often went hand in hand with a “demand for a past” and when academic history – most often for lack of appropriate sources – could not provide such pasts, social actors themselves took up the task. This signalled the end of the academy as the authoritative site for the writing of History, and the emergence of various other history producing institutions in the domain of popular culture – news media, television, cinema, theatre, public memory and museums being the first among many. Chakrabarty has provided detailed studies of the “history wars” sparked by identity politics in India (2006, 2008, 2011), and other historians have analysed the phenomenon elsewhere (e.g., Revel and Levi 2002). In anthropology, identity-driven history making constituted an important aspect of the “invention of tradition” debate (e.g. Briggs 1996) though it was not always clearly problematised as such; with or without the lead of historians, anthropologists and area specialists became also involved in studies of the political uses of the past.

The third strand in the study of history making is shaped by the “reflexive turn” in Western social sciences. It focuses on the complex entanglements between postcolonial epistemologies or, in the 1991 formulation of Talal Asad (1991: 14), on the “irrevocable process of transmutation” that European colonial powers produced in the world. Among these “irrevocable transmutations,” the worldwide hegemony of a European master narrative representing the citizen and the nation as the ultimate conditions of individual and community has been abundantly discussed by Chakrabarty (1992, 2000). Another “irrevocable transmutation” that has attracted the attention of both historians and anthropologists is the need for modern identities or identity claims – be they nationalist, ethnic, minority, “subaltern” or individual – to be rooted in “history” (Herzfeld 2001: 67-68, Chakrabarty 2008). This “universal need” appears as yet another example of how societies and cultures all over the world have adopted and adapted the European specific belief that “subjects [whether human or disciplinary] can be defined by their historical conditions and that change over time can be explained by historical development” (Fasolt 2004: 231). Though anthropologists and other social scientists have discussed at length the colonial involvements of their disciplines, they have been shyer in taking a reflexive turn towards the history making they encounter in their fields partly because, as Herzfeld emphasises, such a turn implies a critical assessment of the role anthropologists and other scholars have played – willingly or unwillingly – in shaping others’ pasts and the ways they are being used in the present.

Central and northern Eurasia

In central and northern Eurasia the sources reflecting the diverse ways of knowing the past and linking it to personal and collective experiences are rich and suggestive. Muslim written sources preserve a wide variety of historical knowledge, and there is enough available data on oral performances to safely guess that there must have been a much larger spectrum of narrative genres circulating with or without interaction with the written forms. Tying this material

into the frame of “history making” is important but far beyond the scope of this volume.⁴ Instead, its contributors present only a few cases, which point to the creation of historical knowledge in diverse forms, to meet a variety of uses in contemporary social and political life.

The study of contemporary central and northern Eurasia has long been hampered by the firm grip of the Soviet Union and China on the region. Both states subscribed not only to a Marxist vision of socialist societies, but also to a rigid frame of Marxist historical materialism in explaining or creating the pasts, presents and futures of the societies they ruled over. The activities of local scholars were strictly controlled and “history making” or social ideologies about the past were not among the topics they were encouraged to engage with.⁵ Though in both the Soviet Union and China the construction and control of ethnicities and minorities was not entirely state-driven, and did not happen without local actors “using the past” to advance identity claims, it is only recently that we have started to get glimpses of the varieties of early national and ethnic history making (e.g., Baldauf 1992; Khalid 2004, 2015; Edgar 2004; Prior 2006).

The fall of the Soviet Union, and the relative liberalisation of China under Deng Xiaoping, changed the conditions for history making, and its study. Not only were local research agendas freed from the firm grip of Marxism, but access to the region also became possible for foreign scholars. “History making,” however, remains a little explored field. The first insights of how social actors engage with the past have come from scholars working in the field of oral history. These scholars – mostly from research institutions outside of the region – have emphasised the mutual construction of object and subject in the process of recounting past experiences (Kamp 2001), the complex interaction between individual memories or lived experiences and official history (Kamp 2008, Dadabaev 2010), the ways in which collective knowledge of the past is constituted, and how it is rarely recorded in official historiography (Kamp 2008). Since oral histories most often deal with the socialist period, their investigation also draws attention to the particular tension social actors experience when engaging with a past on which both past communist discourses and current nationalist ones lay strong – though often contradicting – claims.

The parade of independences and the construction of national pantheons of heroes did not escape scholarly attention, neither did the concomitant “re-writing” of national histories (e.g., Shnirelman 1996, 2009; Manz 2002; Keller 2007; Galiev 2010; Adams 2010, 2013; Denison 2010). The production and circulation of histories outside of these state-driven projects, however, remains largely unexplored except

4 Directly related to “history making” as explored in this volume are genealogical narratives and local historiographies connected with Sufism, prophetic and holy lineages, and Islamic sacred places or shrines which are the object of a long string of scholarly studies, e.g., DeWeese 1994, 1999, 2000a, 2000b; Frank 1998; Privratsky 2001, 2004; Abashin and Bobrovnikov 2003; Dudoignon 2004; Muminov et al. 2011, Muminov and Zhandarbek 2013.

5 More work was done in the field of folklore, occasionally in the style of the early Jan Vansina, but the collection of popular narratives of the past seems to have been overshadowed by the interest and the special value attached to epics, or to other “age-long oral traditions.”

for a 2012 collective volume on local history as an “identity discipline” (Jacquesson and Bellér-Hann 2012) and a 2014 monograph on historical practices among the Uyghurs of Xinjiang (Thum 2014). The contributors to the 2012 volume focus on the often ignored endeavours of local intellectuals and literati to write up the history of their places of birth or residence, or of the local community they identify with. They define local history as “a set of popular forms of historicising the relationship between certain social groups and specific localities in the process of buttressing identity claims” (2012: 3) and argue that local history is a powerful tool in negotiating identity categories through various strategies of inclusion and exclusion. As importantly, according to their observations, local history competes in popularity with official historical narratives and derives its authority from culturally specific notions of morality and ethics, rather than from the past it recovers, or the means by which it does it (id., 5-6). While the 2012 volume provides a set of case studies from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China, the 2014 monograph of Rian Thum is an exploration – or a “biography” in the words of the author himself – of historical practices among the Uyghurs of Xinjiang. Thum argues that a genre of local history – the handwritten narratives on the lives of Muslim saints buried locally – combined with shrine veneration when these life narratives were read and listened to, and with the travels undertaken to visit shrines constituted the most important and the most popular way of Uyghurs’ interactions with the past until the 1940s. As importantly, he demonstrates how, when the communist regime banned both manuscripts and shrine visits, the Uyghurs managed to preserve their own way of interacting with the past by distrusting both official Chinese narratives and Uyghur nationalist ones, and by favouring instead locally produced fictionalised biographies of historical personages, both heroes and villains. Thum’s investigation of Uyghur historical practices confirms Chakrabarty’s (2006) claim that when state regimes exercise a strict control over the production of history, vernacular or local traditions of history making most often find refuge in the realm of popular culture.

This volume seeks to extend the understanding of how knowledge about the past was and is being produced in central and northern Eurasia. Its authors use the methods of several disciplines – literary studies, history, anthropology, area studies – in an attempt to seize all the complexity of history making as a social phenomenon in central and northern Eurasia, and to locate it within a broader context of scholarly reflections on what past or history is, and how they matter. The chronological span of a collective volume can always be subject to contentions. While social actors engage with the past daily and history making seems indispensable for maintaining the cohesion of any social group, there are periods in time when the “the obsession with the past,” or “the inquiry into the past,” or “the demands for past” manifest more actively or more openly (Cohen 1989, Chakrabarty 2006). The case studies in this volume cover a period from the 1980s up until today. This period starts, in China, with the reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping and, in the rest of central and northern Eurasia, with *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*. Along lines suggested by Cohen and Chakrabarty, we argue that the last decades of the 20th century open a period of active “inquiry into the past” for the region under investigation without claiming that it is a unique one, or the only

one.⁶ We leave however to others the exploration of similar previous or forthcoming periods.

The contributions to this volume provide detailed analyses of some of the most outstanding practices of contemporary history making. Their major findings are outlined and discussed in the following paragraphs. In conclusion, we offer some methodological insights and reflections on why the study of history making is epistemologically significant.

Actors, practices and goals

The first case study by Christopher Baker foregrounds the pioneer role of belletrists and writers in shaping national and ethnic histories and pasts. Baker uses the concept of “ethnic bricolage” to capture a practice of history making used by both hegemonic regimes and subaltern others. “Ethnic bricolage,” Baker suggests, is the temptation to impose “an ethnic construct on a recalcitrant past.” It implies compiling remnant words, tracing ancient languages, assembling textual fragments, transcribing written monuments, collecting oral traditions, etc. Empires and states are the first to succumb to the temptation to define ethnic identities, map out ethnic territories and codify languages. Archives, libraries, museums, encyclopaedias, compendia, maps and grammars, among others, help preserve these hegemonic bricolages. However, hegemonic bricolages – or “orderings of the past” – are always threatened by havoc: the havoc subalterns can wreak on the categories imposed by those in power. As Baker emphasises, Suleimenov is but one example of a Soviet Union wide literary movement whose representatives undertook the ordering and glorification of ethnic pasts in the shadow of the Soviet regime – or wrought havoc upon the Soviet system of knowledge production – and whose work and influence still await further investigations. Some observations on post-Soviet history making both in Yakutia (Peers in this volume) and in Kyrgyzstan (Light and Jacquesson in this volume) indicate that “ethnic bricolage” is still a popular practice today. As importantly, more and more social actors are tempted by the opportunity to “revisit” hegemonic collections of the past and make sense of them in their own way: “ethnic bricolage” is also a favourite mode of history making on various social media fora on history in many of the post-Soviet states in central and northern Eurasia.

In her study of oral histories, Marianne Kamp explores the interplay of individual memories, shared memories, collective knowledge and political discourses. Following James Wertsch (2002), she uses collective knowledge – or “mediated knowledge” – to underscore that important portions of the past are “learned about” rather than experienced or remembered. Kamp compares the knowledge about collectivisation within two categories of social actors: old farmers who have lived through the campaign and young researchers who have learned about it in

6 Baker in this volume discusses a similar period of active inquiry in the past that took place in the national republics of the Soviet Union and spread from the 1960s until 1980s, but that involved mostly members of the Soviet literary establishment.

independent Uzbekistan. She shows how old farmers' memories are shared to the extent that most of them reproduce the dominant political discourse at the time of the event, i.e. the Soviet discourse on the justice of class struggle, and thus, on the justice of the repression of rich farmers. But memories remain also individual, insofar as old farmers tell different stories on their or others' class identities, and on the nature of "class relations" at the local level. Kamp draws attention to a peculiar condition, which she calls "stasis in the interpretation of the past," when individual and shared memories of local events prove immune to changing official narratives. She suggests that such a "stasis" occurs when memories or recollections cannot be used to establish claims in the present, and when their shape or content cannot bring harm or benefit. Kamp also argues that while the interplay of individual memories, shared memories, collective knowledge and political discourses remains complex, individual and shared memories have little influence on collective knowledge: thus, those who have lived through the collectivisation keep explaining what happened and why as local manifestations of a just class struggle; instead, the current national narrative – and the mediated knowledge of the last generation of Uzbeks born and schooled in a newly independent nation-state – foreground the injustice of Russian colonisation and Soviet oppression.

The exploration of the relationship between individual memories and collective knowledge is continued by Ingeborg Baldauf on the example of contemporary memoir writers in Uzbekistan. Baldauf observes that an entirely new genre – "the personalised memoir as a mode of writing supra-personal history," or the "writing of impersonal history through personal memoirs" – has emerged with the end of the Soviet regime in Uzbekistan in particular, but also in several other newly independent states in central and northern Eurasia. The new genre is defined by the shared ethical commitment of its practitioners – to reveal the "truth" about the past and pass it on to the next generations – rather than by new stylistic criteria. Just on the opposite, in their desire to make others appreciate their search for "truth," new memoir writers in Uzbekistan do not hesitate to borrow from a variety of older and well-established genres: from shaping their "reasons for authoring" and providing "warning examples" in idioms reminiscent of the Islamicate tradition to moralising in the style of early 20th century Jadid enlighteners. Baldauf observes that all of the new memoir writers are male, and all of them are beyond the age of retirement. They are also mostly "common men" in the sense that they had no official positions to boast of, and thus no particular agency to claim in the shaping of the lived past. Their memoirs abound in mundane experiences – the kind of experiences that are rarely recorded by official history – and it is through recounting these mundane experiences that these Uzbek "common men" attempt to sort out what was "right" and what was "wrong" in the past. Yet, as Baldauf emphasises, they do not contest openly each other's moral judgments; instead, they concede that individual experiences and opinions differ, and that "truth" can be plural. Memoir writers in Uzbekistan, thus, seem to have succeeded not only in benefitting from the affordances of memoir as a genre, but also in establishing a practice of history making that can unfold under an authoritarian regime by keeping a distance with official history (*ta'rix*) and by relinquishing the ambition to

contribute to – or interfere with – state-produced “truths” about the past and present of the Uzbek nation.

In her contribution Ildikó Bellér-Hann addresses the relationship between “small narratives” – be they of individual experiences or of local events and “grand narratives,” in this case the nationalist narratives of China and one of its ethnic minorities, the Uyghurs. She argues that small narratives should not be examined separately from grand narratives – nor should they be expected to replace them – but that the connections between the two should be problematised. Grand narratives, Bellér-Hann suggests, can be conceptualised as “schematic narrative templates” (cf. Wertsch 2004). These “schematic narrative templates” are abstract frameworks that belong to particular cultural and political traditions. Grand narratives, or nationalist ones, function as schematic templates insofar as they contain a main message – the Communist Party’s leadership in the revolutionary struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors in China’s grand narrative, the heroism of local actors struggling against Han domination in the Uyghur one – that can be embodied in a variety of specific stories. Bellér-Hann argues that producers of small narratives connect to the main messages of grand narratives through the skilful use of various narrative tools, or narrative strategies. She discusses three different accounts of a 1946 peasant rebellion in Qumul (Xinjiang) – all of which were published by an officially sponsored series on local history – but she focuses more particularly on the narratives crafted by a Han author and an Uyghur one. Bellér-Hann emphasises that both authors act as the “chroniclers of the people,” the first one by basing his narrative on local oral history, the second one by offering an eyewitness account in the form of a personal memoir. Both authors, therefore, seek to influence collective knowledge of the past by distancing themselves intentionally from professional or official history and by referring to memory – individual, shared, or collective – to imbue their accounts with authority. Bellér-Hann reveals how, by emplotting differently the same series of events, and making different choices of episodes and participants to foreground, the two authors open the way to two very different interpretations of the rebellion: one in the spirit of the Chinese nationalist narrative, the other in unison with the Uyghur one. Bellér-Hann suggests that small narratives might be the only conduit through which historians from minority groups – in her case the Uyghurs – can take part in shaping collective knowledge of the past, and that narrative strategies in such cases can be conceived of as “locally available tactics of history-making.”

The attempt to shape or reshape collective knowledge of the past is also a major goal for the genealogy producers discussed by Svetlana Jacquesson. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the relatively short period of independence has already witnessed several waves of recovering a past for the Kyrgyz. Jacquesson focuses on the rhetoric of truth and authority in this much contested field of history production. She analyses the meta-narrative and meta-discursive strategies of three very different but equally successful genealogy producers and demonstrates how dynamic a collective engagement with knowledge about the past can be: from the early independence obsession with oral genealogies as the only “authentic” and “true” histories of the Kyrgyz to a widely shared later disappointment with them for being too folklore-like and too often incompatible with recorded history. The three

case studies she provides reveal how categories like “oral” and “written,” “indigenous” and “foreign,” “true” and “false” are constructed and negotiated by individual genealogy producers, with or without interaction with their potential audiences. Unlike the Sakha revivalist history producers discussed in the following paragraph, the popular remake of Kyrgyz history and genealogy cannot be “true” and “correct” without claiming a place for the Kyrgyz in global history. And this place is secured, as often as not, by contesting and recasting the “true” and “correct” histories of others. The case of contemporary genealogy producers in Kyrgyzstan seems to demonstrate once again that when truth claims bear upon an ethnic or a national history – instead of being tied to personal life stories as in the case of memoir writers in Uzbekistan – and when current identities need “truthful” history to be legitimised, “truth” ultimately becomes a question of power. Thus, after a period of some twenty years when the state left genealogy production free and unrestricted, and when official history shied away from the “genealogical mode” of knowledge production, the latest developments seem to indicate that the state is mobilising its academic establishment to get “right” the genealogies of the Kyrgyz. Future studies will be needed to assess how the re-appropriation of genealogies by the academy will affect their shape, content and value.

In her contribution Eleanor Peers explores history making as a practice emerging in tandem with Sakha cultural revival after the end of the Soviet regime. Peers argues that history making in the Republic of Sakha today cannot be understood but in relation to a post-Enlightenment academic tradition in which the Sakhas are either represented as “a people without history,” or are exoticised as remote and hardy folks enduring the inhospitality of the Siberian wilderness. She shows how a handful of local intellectuals have succeeded in recovering a Sakha historical and cultural tradition that, instead of being confined to scholarly textual representations, can be experienced in the form of instructive speeches offered during healing sessions, through entertainment and consumption at a spring festival resuscitated from European ethnographic accounts of the 19th century, or through adopting an “authentic” Sakha style in cooking and dressing. Peers argues that the eclectic ways in which Sakha intellectuals produce knowledge on the past – from the practice of somehow dated Leninist-Marxist historical materialism, to bold forays into voguish human genetics, to intelligence received from spirits or shamanic visions – do not betray an incapacity to follow academic conventions, but signal instead a qualitatively different project of knowledge production, a project that, as any social practice, is conditioned and shaped by local and global power dynamics. History makers in Yakutia seem to have abandoned their aspirations to secure a place for the Sakhas in a largely Eurocentric global history that they cannot connect to, except, as Peers aptly puts it, for being “discovered” by Russian colonisers in the 17th century. Instead, by juxtaposing an imaginary and mystical East with an imaginary and rationalist West, and by promoting love for nature and spirituality as a “Sakha-made” way to mankind’s postmodern enlightenment, Sakha intellectuals have succeeded in acquiring identity and agency, and in turning the active engagement with Sakha past traditions and Sakha spiritual values into a distinctive lifestyle, one of many in the contested realm of public culture, but one that makes it

possible for them to establish a presence – and a “worth” – both within their own republic, and within the Russian Federation.

Nathan Light’s contribution focuses on how social actors in Kyrgyzstan connect to the past by piecing together accounts that serve their social and political goals and also appeal to audience members. He emphasises that neither the past, nor the experience of the past are fixed, and that both sources of knowledge about the past and the ways they are interpreted keep changing. The past, in Light’s formulation, “unfolds in constant novelty.” Light argues that memories are crucial in maintaining social relationships and projecting them into the future. He demonstrates how this happens at a class reunion in a Kyrgyz village and how connections to the past on such occasions do not imply long and detailed narratives; instead they seek to entertain the audience through creative and humorous reinterpretations of familiar and shared past experiences. Light extends this observation to the ways popular discussions of history take place among Kyrgyz nowadays. Long narratives on the past are not welcome, neither is “objective history.” What is enjoyed and appreciated are links to the past that are curious, humorous or unexpected, such as the relatedness between Kyrgyz and Native Americans, or the traces left by the military campaigns of the Kyrgyz Adil Baatır (aka Attila) in Europe. The creation of such links is pursued by a variety of amateur historians whose modes of mining “new” evidence differ, as do their ways of organizing this evidence, but who share with one another, with their audiences – and with some of the post-independence genealogists discussed by Jacquesson – the goal of promoting Kyrgyz agency in world history. Light argues that these “re-emplotments” of global history satisfy local needs and the expectations of a local audience in the same way as academic history responds to the anticipations of a scholarly public. He suggests – and in a way summarises the path followed by all of the contributors to this volume – that a “multiplex recounting of history,” i.e. the ethnographic study of how the past is researched and by whom, what evidence is used, how it is interpreted, and the audiences to whom these interpretations are destined, provides a ground for understanding various modes of producing knowledge about the past without pronouncing some of them more correct or more relevant than others.

Methodological insights and epistemological significance

The contributors to this volume strive to contextualise history making as a practice whose actors address various audiences in terms these audiences are expected to understand and appreciate. The methods and styles of history making analysed here are not those of academic authors, but of social actors who create meaningful, useful and “truthful” versions of the past within the political and historical contexts in which they find themselves. The close readings of texts within their social contexts of production, and the ethnographic study of performers shaping their stories according to their audiences are essential to the understanding of various practices of history making.

All the practices of history making examined in this volume are problematic in relation to academic historians’ standards of objectivity and evidence. The facts

that some social actors believe to be true are not necessarily facts that other social actors will accept, and academics in particular follow strict epistemic models and procedures in establishing what is valid evidence and analysis. Nonetheless, any making, commitment to and expression of knowledge requires systematic procedures, and is worthy of study. To understand history making, we pursue the investigation of what social actors consider evidence on the past, how they find it and use it, and how they craft narratives and other representations from it. We do not probe the realities of the past, except in the limited context of how it is experienced by the people whose historical knowledge we study. We strive to understand what someone does, how and why in making history. At the most, the focus on history making may help understand how various social actors have taken evidence – whether experience, documents, material artefacts, or the narratives of others – and created from it their versions of the past.

Epistemologically, then, it is inappropriate to approach popular practices of knowledge production about the past with the conventional scholarly tools for evaluating “history.” But it is equally inappropriate to dismiss them as irrelevant. As argued above, there are particular periods in time when outbursts of history making or “demands for pasts” happen. In the case of India, Chakrabarty (2006) argues that history making – or at least what he calls “the new breed of ‘amateur’ historiography to which nationalism gives rise” – flourishes when state institutions in third world democracies fail to exercise discipline and regulation and when social tensions – debates and disputes on recognition, representation and identities – are let free in the realm of mass politics. The current political and social settings in some parts of central and northern Eurasia – Kyrgyzstan, for example – share common features with the Indian situation. Any attempt then to capture the dynamics of group or collective identities, or of identity politics, seems doomed to failure without a close attention to various popular practices of history making.

What appears also significant for central and northern Eurasia is the fact that much of the history making takes place under strong state regimes. But even when states enforce discipline and exercise regulation – and, thus, are capable of imposing their institutions as the only authoritative sites for processing the past and producing identities – the criteria defining what is “real” or “official” history – or which are the most adequate representations of the past – yield just classifications as Michael Herzfeld (2001: 80) usefully reminds us. Herzfeld claims that these classifications are local and cultural – though they may also be global and hegemonic (cf. Chakrabarty 1992) – and that classifications have no agencies; they constitute only the medium in which agencies deploy. History making provides then an access to the state-citizens nexus, and allows a systematic investigation of the differences and interactions between official and popular programs of historical representations, and the ongoing debates – both open and covert – about the appropriate representations of the past to be made public.

Finally, in recent years, discursive authority – or the authority to represent cultures and histories – have been disputed between Western scholars – still largely perceived locally as late beginners larded with theory and Eurocentrism – and local scholars, for whom indigeneity, knowledge and authority are inseparable. This is a worthy debate, but it deserves to be articulated epistemologically more

clearly than it is now. As importantly, scholars working in central and northern Eurasia will also have to face the challenges posed to all of them by the institutions of knowledge production in the realm of popular culture. In the existing literature – both local and Western – these institutions are either ignored or downplayed, or mocked for “myth making.” Yet, given the limits of the academy as a site of knowledge production, and its lessening capacity to shape collective knowledge, a highbrow epistemological stance might strike back and weaken it further. The epistemological challenges are huge and the establishment of a common frame for the various practices of history production is still a project of the future. What is possible now is a closer investigation of the production processes coupled with the exercise of cultural reflexivity. This volume on history making as a popular practice of knowledge production is a step in that direction.

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