

Interview – Till Mostowlansky

Written by E-International Relations

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Till Mostowlansky is an anthropologist working on a variety of subjects, including mobility, humanitarianism, development, materiality, and Islam. He is a Research Fellow at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, and currently based in Melbourne, Australia. Till previously lectured at the University of Bern and the University of Hong Kong. His latest monograph *Azan on the Moon: Entangling Modernity along Tajikistan's Pamir Highway* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017) is based on a long period of fieldwork along the Pamir Highway in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan. The book provides a bottom-up perspective on the contested notion of modernity in the region, intertwining this discussion with analyses of ethnicity, peripherality, religion, and statehood. Till is also working on a number of collaborative research projects covering subjects such as Muslim humanitarianism and the anthropology of infrastructure in Inner Asia.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time and where do you see the most urgent debates happening in your field?

There are different types of scholars. Some can tell you in one sentence what their discipline, field and specific research interests are. Others have to make this stuff up as they go and will probably tell you a different story every time you ask them. I belong to the latter category and this has to do with the fact that I am interested in the world at large, in every detail of human activities and in the broader social contexts in which they happen. What I am looking for are thought-provoking and productive entry points. For instance, in my early research religion was one such entry point. In my most recent book, it was a road and the types of mobility and immobility that it invokes. In my current research, it is the moral sentiment of “doing good” and its historical genealogies in charity, development and humanitarianism. In many ways, in anthropology these entry points are evergreens, but of course for me specifically they are time-bound. I was an undergraduate during 9/11 and the war on terror, I wrote my doctoral dissertation when the study of materiality, technology and ecology was taken up more widely in the social sciences, and my ongoing project has coincided with attempts to decentre research on humanitarianism and development.

Going forward I do not see how any social scientist can get around considering the effects of the global ecological crisis, climate emergency and the rise of inequality and dispossession that have been amplified by the ongoing pandemic. I think no matter what we study future debates will necessarily lead back to these fundamental problems and to the question of how we can engage with each other, other species and the environment in less violent and destructive ways. A few years ago, I moved from Hong Kong to Australia. It was a move away from a political crisis that is deeply rooted in colonialism and sentiments of dispossession. In Australia, I learned that such abusive relationships are much more closely linked to the environment than I had ever cared to think. Ghassan Hage describes this quite poignantly in his book *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?* Thinking about the consequences of Hage's point that both racism and environmental destruction are rooted in a violent “domestication” of the other seems to me like a project that requires urgent study on a global scale.

Much of your work takes mountainous frontiers and borderlands in Central Asia as a point of departure. What are some of the lessons such areas teach us about the modern state?

Theoretically speaking such borderlands do not teach us anything about the state that other places could not. I think it is important to mention this because mountainous frontiers tend to become easily exoticized and borderlands can

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sometimes turn into a fetish. However, in terms of research practicalities there are some advantages to the places that I have researched in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan. If we look at the state not as an abstract, distant formation, but as something that is discursively and materially performed by all people involved then these borderlands offer voices from the margins. These margins are not only of territorial nature. They are also economic, political, and cultural. In other words, my research is less about geographical location than about people's ability to think and desire a different state from their position of marginality. One can, for instance, also find such spaces of vocal discontent in underprivileged areas in bigger cities around the world.

In what ways are places like Gorno-Badakhshan in Tajikistan, Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan, and the Wakhan corridor in Afghanistan connected or disconnected? How do interstate borders and processes of globalisation in these highlands matter in people's everyday lives?

In terms of nation-state boundaries, these places are actually quite disconnected. This is the result of a long history of political separation, from colonialism to the Cold War to contemporary nation-states trying to forcefully integrate these borderlands in often violent fashion. However, the underlying ethnic, linguistic and religious ties between all parts of this border "quadrangle" of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and Tajikistan are quite strong. Very few people actually move between them and there are plenty of stereotypes about one another, but there are organizations that actively try to create meeting points. Organizations led by Ismaili Muslims, such as the Aga Khan Development Network, play an important role in this regard. On the one hand, there are attempts to increase mobility on a local level through support for infrastructure and economy, for instance through roads, bridges, border markets, tourism and professional exchange. On the other hand, there is also the creation of "third spaces" where interactions of people from these borderlands happen. For example, in the context of scholarship programs that lead people from the different parts of these borderlands to educational centres like London where they meet and pursue funded university degrees. These connections are fragile but they do persist. Except for the case of Xinjiang in China. The situation there has deteriorated to such a degree that disconnection and militarization are overwhelming. It shows how targeted and ruthless nation-state politics can, at least in the short-term, undermine century old transnational ties.

The central concept of your ethnographic book *Azan on the Moon: Entangling Modernity along Tajikistan's Pamir Highway* is 'modernity'. What does the phrase "entangling modernity" concretely mean, and how does the book question a simple modernity-marginality dichotomy?

In concrete terms I argue that, while there have been "big" projects of modernity offered by actors from Soviet governments to development organizations, people along the Pamir Highway ground modernity in their everyday lives. Often, they do not conform to ideologies of what modernity is supposed to look like. Instead they interweave elements from various historical-ideological origins and employ them to create their own sense of what it means to be modern. For example, Soviet ideas of secular modernity are actually quite popular in the Pamirs. A strong, paternalistic state that provisions its citizens with goods, values and visions for the future has its appeal. However, many of my interlocutors saw deficiency in the "secular" part of this discussion. In their view, socialism should have been enriched, perhaps even "perfected", with Islamic ethics. Debates around modernity in the Pamirs also involve some unexpected spatial consequences. Many takes on modernity have foregrounded links to centres of economic and political power. But modernity in the Pamirs is located in the political and economic margins and people use modernity in a broad sense to distinguish themselves from – in their opinion – less modern places, such as Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe. Past Soviet attention paid to this geopolitically important borderland has a lot to do with this. The second half of the twentieth century in the Pamirs was defined by so-called "Moscow provisioning" which involved privileged material support but also political and aesthetic connections to the centre of the Soviet Union. The loss of many of these privileges in independent Tajikistan led to ideas of the new state's inability to provide and to expectations of modernity vis-à-vis NGOs which could never be fulfilled.

In *Azan on the Moon* you also delve into ethnic, regional, and religious identities and relations along the highway. How have these identities and relations been influenced by changes in the highway communities themselves, as well as developments beyond them?

These are constantly shifting relations and, in my book, I do not claim to have definite answers to this question. In the

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case of Afghanistan, the long history of stigmatization and demonization in the course of war has played a role. There were various Soviet attempts to create distinction precisely because of the historically close relationship between people on both sides of the border. With regard to violence in Kyrgyzstan, specifically the clashes in Osh in June 2010, it was suddenly very desirable, during this particular time, to be located high up in the mountains, far away from the troubles. Now, during the Covid-19 pandemic, people have again left the city and sought refuge in the Pamirs to escape the crisis in Kyrgyzstan. But viewed from the eastern parts of the Pamirs, Osh is the closest city and remains important with respect to trade and personal ties. Particularly Kyrgyz from the eastern Pamirs travel back and forth on a regular basis even though the notion of Osh as a big city is both promising and troubling at the same time.

In your analysis of Ismaili Pamiris, their religious institutions, and their place in the modern state of Tajikistan, you use Stef Jansen's (2015) distinction between statehood and statecraft. How is this helpful?

Jansen's distinction is useful as it refines our view of the different functions of a state. Often academic studies of the state are actually contributions on what people recognize as states in symbolic terms. According to Jansen this is largely about what the state is, claims to be, and should be. The recognition of statehood is of course very important in many cases. But when looking at the role of transnational institutions built by Ismailis the focus on statehood is not all that productive. Ismailis do have a history of statehood in the sense that they employ a constitution, have a flag, and a system of governance, but their role in Tajikistan is that of an NGO. Yet, how can we grasp the massive scope of infrastructure that they have built, all the welfare services, their large-scale urban planning endeavours? In these contexts, Ismaili institutions employ statecraft, or the practical functions of a state. This is what the state does, claims to do or is expected to do. The Tajik government seems to have an ambivalent attitude towards Ismaili statecraft. The funds are welcome and ensure investments in a region that is ripe with discontent. However, official statements also suggest that the government is sceptical of the social and political capital that Ismaili institutions accumulate with their activities.

As part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, the Kulma road (opened in 2004) served as a new trade route between China and Tajikistan. How has this infrastructural link changed people's lives in the Eastern Pamirs?

For Tajikistan in general, this trade route is crucial to secure the import of Chinese goods. One could think that this would create plenty of job opportunities along the way. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Generally speaking, the closer a person lives to the border with China the less benefit this person gets from this trade route. Transport companies are largely in the hands of the Tajik presidential entourage based in the capital Dushanbe. And if there are people in the Pamirs who profit then they are located in the region's administrative centre Khorog and not along the road to China. It is actually quite depressing to see how trucks carrying Chinese goods speed through high mountain settlements while creating only a minimal amount of low-paid jobs. As in many other places around the world it is not infrastructure that automatically creates wealth for everyone. It is the responsibility of political actors to govern these infrastructures in a way that ensures participation and equity. This is clearly not the case in Tajikistan and one of the reasons why Tajik officials are more likely to show up in the Panama papers than to receive awards for equitable economic development. On a larger scale, and perhaps looking at other Central Asian states and Pakistan, this sort of cronyism poses a big problem for the credibility of the Belt and Road Initiative.

How do developments in China's Xinjiang region, populated not only by Uyghurs but also Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Pamiris, resonate on the other side of the international borders, in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan?

By now people in these places are so disconnected that there is little knowledge of what is going on across the borders. Some of my interlocutors in the border region – in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan and Pakistan – are very well-informed through international news. Others remain in disbelief and prefer to turn to conspiracy theories which blame everything on Western propaganda. I have also met a few people who know exactly about the oppression and violence but still support authoritarian policies. In Pakistan, one of my interlocutors from the border

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region with China told me that he thought the Chinese handled their Uyghur population wisely. He told me that, after all, Uyghurs were Muslims and there was no other way to discipline Muslims than through punishment. The man I talked to is, of course, a Muslim himself. Before the unrest in Xinjiang in 2009 the situation was quite different. In fact, there was a time when people exchanged letters with relatives across the border. This time is definitely over and it seems the current sense of disconnection will only grow.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of politics and anthropology?

I am not that advanced myself, and I am not sure I want to bother anyone with unsolicited advice that is unlikely to age well. I would rather prefer to express a wish in a collective sense. If there is just one thing I wished we could do better as social scientists it is to think less about career steps, CVs and sales pitches and more about how we can be relevant in our contemporary and future world. I do not mean relevant in a monetized sense. I mean politically relevant, passionate and present somewhere in public debates, in people's conversations over dinner, in parliament or on the streets.