

Moral struggles in a post-socialist society: Kyrgyzstanis' reflections on the market transition.

In Kyrgyzstan, the transition from a planned economy has witnessed the expansion of monetary exchanges, accompanied by changes in property rights, public entitlements, informal rules and community norms, and so thereby re-shaping the moral economy (Hann 2003). In many ways, the complex bundles of rights, responsibilities and obligations have been altered to fit into the neo-liberal agenda of privatisation, market reforms and reduced state subsidies. Advocates of economic reforms argue that 'the market' can empower consumers and workers, liberating them from central planners' controls, managers' arbitrariness and social networks of favours. Yet, 'the market' can spur self-interest to the point of undermining social practices of friendship, education, policing, entertainment and so on (MacIntyre 1985; Walzer 1982). Furthermore, individuals can struggle to define their sense of obligations to others and enact 'virtuous lives' as market forces displace moral and traditional norms and promote instrumental reasoning (Sayer 2004). The combination of civilising and destructive effects of the market produces moral ambivalence, contributing to the uncertain transition.

The paper introduces the moral dimension into the analysis of post-communist transition by examining how Kyrgyzstanis understand the social and economic changes. In particular, we discuss how their sense of obligations to others in various social spheres such as family, health care and education have been affected by market forces. We deliberately chose 33 respondents from a broad spectrum of occupations living in Bishkek, and conducted semi-structured interviews in Russian. In this way, we make an empirically informed contribution to the emerging literature on 'moral economy'.

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