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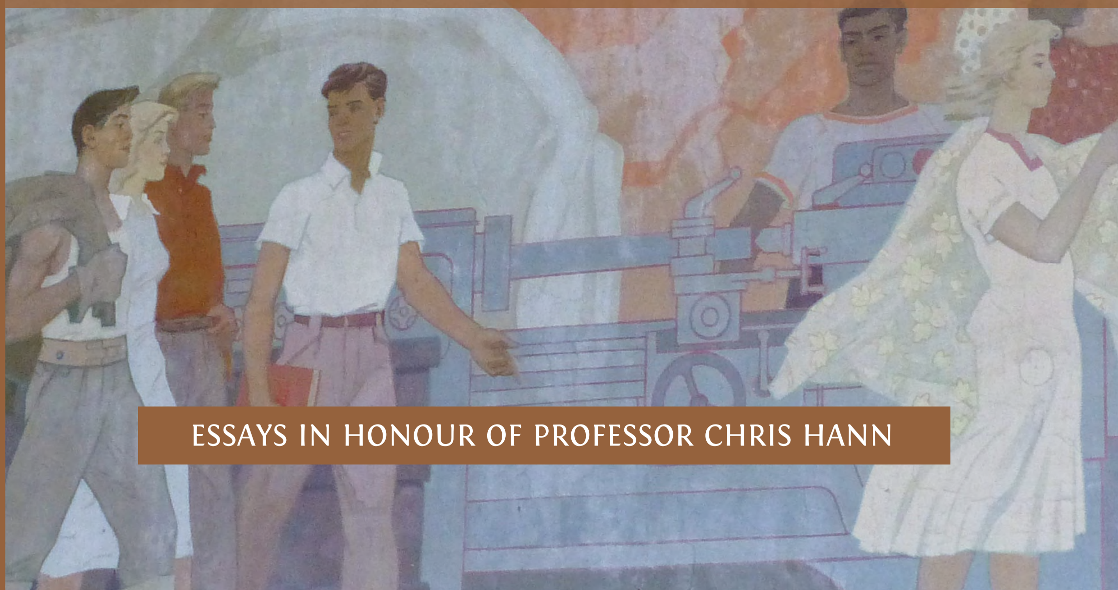
ANTHROPOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION

From Europe to Asia and Back



ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF PROFESSOR CHRIS HANN

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Cover image: Lenin mural, House of Culture, Temirtau, Kazakhstan (2014). Photo by Tommaso Trevisani. Cover design by Katy Saunders.

5. The Moral Economy of Consensus and Informality in Uzbekistan[1]

Tommaso Trevisani

Moral Economies in Post-socialist Eurasia

The concept of moral economy has been popular among anthropologists of post-socialist societies, especially for addressing moral claims and commentaries of those disenfranchised by the expansion of the market principle. Typically, following Thompson's (1963) original usage of the concept, the focus of these studies has been on the revival of older moral economies among communities marginalised by the demise of socialism, either by looking at how those dispossessed by post-socialist reforms invoke values and principles that challenge reform outcomes and question their morality (Hann et al. 2003), or on how, leaning on Scott's (1976) understanding of the concept, local strategies are set up to react against new forms of land dispossession (as in Gambold-Miller and Heady 2003, on Russia) or labour exploitation (Kofti 2016,

1 An early draft of this paper was presented at a workshop of the Industry and Inequality group (2012–2015) at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in 2013. I wish to express my deep gratitude to all participants for feedback, criticism and comments received, especially to Catherine Alexander, Chris Hann, Jonathan Parry, James Carrier for providing written feedback. An improved draft was presented at a conference organized in Stockholm in June 2015 by the George Washington University's Central Asia Program (CAP) and the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. M. Laruelle and T. Dadabaev are warmly thanked for this opportunity. Furthermore, I wish to thank Laura Adams, Niccolò Pianciolla, Riccardo Cucciolla, Marco Buttino for their advice and for feedback on different versions of the paper. The final draft has greatly benefited from the comments of this volume's anonymous reviewers. Fieldwork was funded by Gerda Henkel Foundation and Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin.

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on Bulgaria). But the emergence of new, distinctively pro-market, post-socialist moral economies has also been observed: Susanne Brandtstätter (2003), for instance, reports on how in south-east China's context of economic boom, values became revitalised in order to stabilise newly volatile social interactions and trust in institutions was ignited "bottom-up" by recourse to non-market economic actions that energised communities' sociality and rituality. By contrast, in the cotton-growing oasis of Khorezm in Uzbekistan, those in power have attempted, by manipulating older ideas of the moral economy, to mitigate the tensions triggered by impoverishment and polarisation, and to strengthen rural communities' acceptance of decollectivisation. Yet, despite persistent appeals to social harmony and symbolic redistribution, commodification and disintegration have grown as a consequence of increasing disparities between reform winners and losers since the end of collective agriculture (Trevisani 2011; Hann 2019: 129–166). Whether old or new, re-surfacing or newly emerging, post-socialist moral economies point to the moral dis-embedding of markets (Polanyi 1957) and to attempts by local communities and governments at handling the rift between market and society opening up with the "transition" to capitalism in the former socialist world (Hann 2002; Götz 2015).

Lamenting inaccurate, inflationary usage of the term, Chris Hann (2018) has recently cautioned against the concept of moral economy. He has argued that while useful to problematise the moral embeddedness of economic action, the concept turns hollow when abstracted from concrete settings that are best studied ethnographically. Instead, he pledges to ground moral economies by tracking dominant values through history, i.e. by looking at their concrete reconfigurations in social relations across time. In the Hungarian case study that he presents, the central value of material work retains appeal and meaning across the epochs and systems. This explains why recently introduced workfare policies are welcomed by the rural poor in Hungary, even if they are a palliative measure against their growing problems. Some scholars have seen in workfare a form of labour dispossession originating in the context of neoliberal austerity and labour precarisation, and one that is often condemned and contested by its recipients (Standing 2011; Wacquant 2012). By contrast, Chris Hann observes how, paradoxically, the introduction of "*közmunka*" in Hungary, (Hann 2018: 237)—a workfare scheme coupling manual work and welfare in the context

of low employment and welfare shrinkage—is welcomed by the rural poor because it appears moral and meaningful even though it goes against their class interests, since it resonates with the locally rooted notion of "work as a value". This value, Hann argues, can be, at best, instrumentalised by reactionary politicians, but never totally ignored, since it remains constitutive of moral communities across time. In the Hungarian case we have an example of how a new "moral economy" (although Chris Hann is sceptical of the phrasing) brings together populist elites and rural poor against the "dominant form" (236) of EU-mediated market integration, resulting in an increasingly illiberal and pro-populist market economy model. Accordingly, workfare in Hungary testifies to the resilience of the central value of work in society, while populism's appeal is rooted in criticism against the dominant form of integration and qualifies for Chris Hann as a "countermovement" in the sense of Karl Polanyi.

Seen from another corner of former socialist Eurasia, Chris Hann's Hungarian case study on the workings of the moral dimension of political economy offers intriguing lines for comparison. Due to its different political and economic framework, neoliberal workfare à la *közmunka* does not exist in Uzbekistan. But there are similarities with the traditionally commended, communal duty service known in Uzbekistan as *hashar* (see for instance Wall 2008: 149–152). *Hashar* is a form of non-remunerated voluntary community service work, widespread in the traditional Islamic neighbourhoods of the *mahalla*s, Central Asia's urban residential communities (Rasanayagam 2011a) and part of the "older moral economy of the mosque" (Hann 2011: 115–116) in Central Asia's oasis cultures. Typically, it encompasses work of the type that in rural Hungary could pass as *közmunka* (upkeep of streets and canals, renovating communal infrastructure, etc.). *Hashar*'s very existence, coupled with the fact that the state in Uzbekistan lacks financial means and is able to guarantee only abysmal social subsidy, forestalls the very possibility of a workfare system comparable to those of more developed market economies. And yet, as in the Hungarian case, so too in Uzbekistan we can observe local convergences of interests and values between populist elites and ordinary citizens materialising in particular moral economies. In Hungary, this convergence results in hegemonic populist discourses successfully deflecting the "blame" for newly created economic problems from national elites to supra-national

entities. In Uzbekistan, the sodality of authoritarianism and informality sustains the hegemony of national(istic) discourses and fosters the compliance of the new middle classes with the authoritarian regime.

In both settings, and against the grain of Thompson's original usage, a moral economy perspective can shed light on the connections between illiberal politics, economy and populism through values across history. In addressing these relationships, the role and meaning of moral economies can shift over time and space, even within the same political framework. So, for instance, in Uzbekistan: whereas my research in Khorezm highlighted how communities' and power holders' interests and values were drifting apart despite mutual invocations to a common moral economy, research later conducted on newly emerging, middle-class sensibilities in another part of Uzbekistan, the Ferghana Valley, pointed in the opposite direction (Trevisani 2014). Over the fieldwork, local discourses signalling compliance with the course of the authoritarian regime had emerged as a topic that caught my attention. While this "consensus" is ambiguous, unstable and a manifestation of particular, heterogeneous social segments, it also signals the existence of an underestimated and often-overlooked legitimacy of the autocratic ruling elites among a significant part of the population, the growing middle strata. With an interest in the material conditions and moral reasoning underpinning people's contradictory political sentiments under a harsh authoritarian regime, I would here like to pay attention to how people's place in the informal economy shapes their attitudes towards the state. More specifically, I will argue that authoritarianism and informality mutually reinforce each other when their sodality is reinforced by a shared vision of the moral economy.

Informal Economy in Uzbekistan

Anthropologists have used the concept of the informal economy (Hart 1973) to address economic activities outside the formally contractualised and regulated sector. Rasanayagam has adopted it to describe how in post-Soviet Uzbekistan boundaries between the formal and the informal economy have become blurred, if not in fact meaningless, since informality, as compared to the situation before independence, is no longer counterbalanced by a "formal counterpart" and "has become the rule" (2011b: 683), the normal way of conducting life and business.

While the informal sector existed and even thrived in the Uzbek SSR, he concludes that after the collapse of the USSR a more general informalisation of the state, society and lifeworlds (682) has occurred in Uzbekistan. Classic examples for such informalisation could be seen in the restaurant owner forced into illegality as a consequence of regulatory ambiguity that makes him become easy prey to racketeering officials; or the teacher unable to sustain his family by a meagre income that during the Soviet Union used to be satisfactory, and who, nowadays, in order to sustain a modest living, additionally to his salary takes bribes from pupils and works in agriculture. Such examples abound in Uzbekistan since the informalisation of economic practices has risen to become an all-important form of integration (Rasanayagam 2011b).

During the Soviet Union the second (shadow or illegal) economy (Grossman 1977; Humphrey 1983; Ledeneva 1998) that revolved around the diversion and redistribution of manipulable resources was part of the "historic compromise" between the Soviet power holders and a populace refraining from voicing political claims in exchange for decent living standards (Cook 1993). Soviet power holders accrued "a legitimation based on popular consensus and acceptance of, or at least indifference to, the rulers' chosen course" (132). This consensus was based on the relative affluence and large availability of formal jobs, basic goods and social entitlements, and around the predilection of sectors of strategic importance, such as the military or heavy industry workers, who received special treatment and privileges.

In Uzbekistan this late Soviet historic compromise had its own nuances. Here, as Lubin (1984) shows, the native population did not wish to enter the officially privileged and better-paid economic sectors because the informal possibilities to private gain entailed in the less prestigious and lower-paid sectors made them more attractive than the officially privileged ones. Much of people's material conditions came to depend on informal and illegal mechanisms. Generalised collusion in these practices had a depoliticising effect on people, reinforcing their "consensus" with the status quo. The cotton sector, representing the economic backbone and the major drive for modernisation of this more backward Soviet republic (by comparison with the more industrialised European core), has been of special significance also in regard to the spread of informal and illegal practices. Centred around fraudulent overreporting of cotton harvests and private appropriation

of collective resources, these practices came to public notoriety with the cotton scandal of the perestroika years, when investigations disclosed systematic collusion of party officials, ranging from top republican levels down to *kolkhoz* enterprises, and resulted in a "purge" and a reshuffle of the republican political establishment (Rumer 1991; Cucciolla 2017).

Although economic informalisation had been already a characteristic of the late Soviet years, in the early post-Soviet period people's relation towards the informal sector changed significantly. Under the new conditions of shortage and contraction of the socialised sector, people had to struggle for their livelihoods. Their reliance on informal sources of income had become existentially crucial in a situation of need and deprivation at a time when formal-sector jobs were no longer providing liveable salaries. The old system, in which consensus was sustained through collusion in the informal economy, also underwent a radical transformation by adapting to the economic shortage and to the reorganisation of the economic structure from the all-Soviet to the national economy framework. But far from meaning the end of the formal economy and of the state's grip on the informal sector, I observe how the informal economic sector nowadays can be viewed as instrumental in sustaining the compliance of the middle strata with the dominant political order. In what follows, I want to scrutinise this relationship with a moral economy perspective. Unlike Hungary, where the convergence of interests and values between populist elites and ordinary citizens reverts around the value of manual work, in Uzbekistan we witness the centrality of the informal economy in shaping the moral framework in the relationship between the authoritarian state and its citizens.

The "Uzbek Path", Informal Economy and Middle Strata

After the end of the Soviet Union Uzbekistan did not follow the Washington Consensus or "shock therapy to the market"-type of liberalisation policy. Instead, by prioritising political control and stability over economic growth and structural reforms, it opted for a very gradual evolution of the political and economic system with a partial and piecemeal introduction of market reforms stylised by the government as the "Uzbek path" to the market (on this for instance:

Gafarli and Kasaev 2001). With this model the government aimed at following the economic trajectories of developmental states such as South Korea (Harvey 2005), but results lagged behind expectations: Corporations and foreign capital have been mostly scared off by an unfavourable investment climate, the chosen path to economic self-sufficiency and re-industrialisation outside the WTO framework did not lead to an economic performance able to raise the living standards of a rapidly growing population, and also forced many to migrate for labour. Despite reform reluctance and attempts to screen off globalisation from the country, its typical effects, such as the dissolution of Soviet-protected salaried work, the growth of a massive labour migration, and the rise of nationalism, have occurred regardless (Bazin 2009).

At the onset of independence, a façade of liberal institutional set-up and democratic power divisions was adopted but, in substance, the centralised power of the Soviet-era command hierarchy was preserved and even strengthened. The new national elites, now liberated from Moscow's oversight, enjoyed unrestrained power. Under the strong hand of the first president, Karimov, the opposition was outlawed and meaningful political dialectic blocked (Fierman 1997), the only veritable opposition remaining consisting in grassroots Islamic activism voicing criticism of the former Soviet establishment. Islamic grassroots movements outside the official political spectrum posed a challenge to the newly independent political establishment in the early post-independence period, but this political Islam was eventually surmounted thereafter, and in the aftermath of 9/11 secular authoritarian regimes in the region further consolidated their domestic power by soliciting Western security support in the war on terror on the grounds of a grossly exaggerated, internal "Islamic threat" (Khalid 2007).

Unwilling to open up to (and marginalised by) international markets, the authoritarian government's domestic economic policy has been the decisive factor in the definition of economic and social relations in the country. The cotton sector (and agriculture more broadly) remained the object of heavy government intervention as it maintained a central role in the economy to fund a more diversified and urban-based economy. In the initial years of independence agriculture was rearranged around import substitution (wheat) and cash crop export (cotton). The rural sector remained heavily taxed through the imposition of unfavourable

procurement prices, leaving behind severely impoverished rural communities (Kandiyoti 2003), so that rural wealth was syphoned off to the growing cities, in which services- and trade-based sectors gradually advanced and over time surpassed in importance the role of cotton for the overall economy.

As elsewhere in neoliberal and post-socialist reform settings (cf. Harvey 2005), in Uzbekistan the privatisation of state and collective assets has been orchestrated by power holders mostly to meet the self-serving interest of the new elites. The state kept a strong control over the channelling of the sources of wealth accumulation. Despite this, and although the possibilities of entrepreneurial success were being rigged and biased in favour of the elites and their affiliates, the very possibility of freely engaging in individual entrepreneurial activity, especially encouraged by a government eager to emulate the success of Asian Tigers, set free a growth of trade, bazaar economy, entrepreneurialism and brought a people previously employed in regular work or in collectivised agriculture to the new, non-regulated and chaotic entrepreneurship of the market era. Mirroring broader post-socialist patterns, the social sector was significantly defunded and social inequalities increased sharply. But the growing inequality also opened up an often-overlooked space in between the newly rich and newly poor, occupied by those who were able to navigate with some success the challenges and opportunities offered by Uzbekistan's road to national independence: the new middle strata (Trevisani 2014). This trend can be exemplified with the urban transformation that occurred in Namangan, a city that I have repeatedly visited for fieldwork between 1997 and 2009.

Over the years of independence, this city in the Ferghana Valley had greatly enlarged its surface. New neighbourhoods, peripheries, bazaars, transport infrastructure, high-rise buildings, and shops had reshaped the cityscape and conferred to it a more modern urban outlook. Soviet Namangan in the year 1973 counted 194,000 inhabitants and 31 large factories which employed 17,200 industry workers as of 1975.[2] This

2 Namangan's factories were mostly in the light industry sector. The shoe and textile factories, meat factory, and food processing factories were among the most important employers in the city. However, its industry also included a chemical plant, construction material processing factories and two power stations (O'zbek Sovet Enziklopediyasi, 1976: 527–528).

means that although industry was a significant employer at that time, the city's primary vocation has never been an industrial one and there can be said to be some continuity between the Soviet and the post-Soviet employment structure. The Soviet textile industries attracted Russophone workers relocating from Europe, while local (Uzbek Muslim) residents preferred employment in administration, social services, education, trade, and the 'domestic sector' (*maishni xizmat*—something close to petite bourgeoisie employment—services, handicraft etc.), as well as in the administration of the cotton produced in the city's agricultural hinterland.[3] After independence, when factories closed down, the *promzona* (Namangan's industrial district) decayed and the jobs in the light industry (textile, food processing) disappeared. Public sector jobs also dramatically worsened and lost their attraction. Those who were left behind without a job, or with a job too bad to earn a living, were absorbed by the informal sector in myriads of ways, in sectors including trade, handicraft, construction and transport, operating virtually unreported and untaxed outside the capture of the state. The Slavic former industrial workers left, but the city's population, sustained by the higher birth rates among the titular nationality, grew nonetheless (the city' population more than doubled in between 1973 and 2008). Uzbeks making their living in the reformed public or the informal private sector gradually reshaped the post-Soviet city: like many other Central Asian cities, Namangan had developed divided between a traditional, Uzbek-speaking area composed of *mahalla* neighbourhoods and a predominantly Russian-speaking, modern, Soviet sector referred to as *mikroraion*, an apartment block community built of multi-storey, prefabricated buildings. In the *mikroraion* district, after the mass-departure of the Russophone inhabitants, many of the new residents had moved from the nearby rural districts into the city, taking up jobs in the public sector: university, college, and school teachers (*domla*s), medical staff, police, etc. Roads had become busier with *marshrutka* buses and private cars than ever. The city's commercial, educational, administrative, and leisure opportunities increasingly draw people from the rural districts for day-trip matters to the city. In the old city, the

3 For comparison, according to Abdullaev in 1975 more people were employed in trade and catering alone (18,400) than those in industry, a tendency that would increase year by year until the end of the Soviet Union (Abdullaev 1995: 134).

*mahalla*s around the main bazaar are now full of little *zehxona*, sweatshops and craft shops dealing with textiles, handicrafts and utensil supply, often developing in-house, within the walls of residents' traditional *hovli* houses (the traditional, large houses with internal courts, suited to multi-generational and multi-nuclear families). More than aspiring to a public-sector job or education, nowadays the *mahalla*'s youth is attracted by the better possibilities for earning money prospected by the bazaar. In the former colonial city, once the city's Soviet and now post-Soviet administrative centre, where the main government buildings are located, little *dukkon*s (shops) such as service and copy shops, travel bureaus, etc., have appeared in large numbers. In this changed urban setting, ordinary people's struggle for livelihoods have become more cut-throat and competitive, but spaces for economic success and development have also opened up, and the situation for urban citizens looks less bleak and difficult than in the rural areas.

In this transformed urban landscape, the middle strata, a socially heterogeneous group straddling the private and the public employment sector and situated in between the impoverished and the newly enriched urban elites, has risen and adapted to the changed economic and political environment. By looking at their moral stances and political sensibilities, and at how they navigate livelihoods in an authoritarian context, I found that the terms of the moral economy of the urban middle strata had developed differently from those observed before in rural Khorezm.

Andijan and Its Consequences

The Ferghana Valley is a region renowned for its religious zealotry and acrimonious relationship with independent Uzbekistan's secular leadership. Over the early years of independence, the region had witnessed grassroots protests for moral renewal and re-Islamisation against the secular government of the newly independent state. Most notably, the movement "Adolat" (justice), active in the early 1990s in Namangan, was pressing for sharia-based rule and challenging the secular government with an Islamic anti-corruption rhetoric, which elevated the city to a symbol of the confrontation between the post-Soviet government and local Islam. Rooted in the Islamic spring of

the late perestroika years, the movement captured public interest and sympathies among the Muslim majority but lacked coherent goals and profile and failed to seize power and to affirm itself as a meaningful alternative to the secularised national order propagated by the post-Soviet government. Over the 1990s the government eventually mastered the challenge to its power monopoly in this city and imposed severe controls on the region, but tensions lingered on. The region continued to attract particular concern of the government's security arm and became a social and political test bench for the young independent state confronting mass impoverishment, social polarisation and potential instability.

In May 2005 tensions culminated in the "Andijan events" when a popular rally of people protesting against the incarceration of a pious group of entrepreneurs known as "Akromiya" accused of sedition by the government ended in a bloody repression (see on this: Ilkhamov 2006; Liu 2014). The group's mixing of economic and philanthropic accomplishments made it widely popular, but its success was also the reason it became a thorn in the side of the government. Adopting a religious ethic, its local popularity resonated as a form of socially-minded, moral entrepreneurship. Although the Andijan uprising was a desperate attempt by ordinary people to voice their dissatisfaction against the inefficiency and the corruption of the government officials, it was not questioning the "system" as such. In May 2005 protesters gathered on the main square to direct the attention of the president to the city's problems in protest against the city authorities, but government overreaction turned the peaceful sit-in into a massacre in which hundreds were killed by the indiscriminate use of force (Human Rights Watch 2005). The protest was preceded by a nation-wide introduction of new taxation, licences and control measures targeting the informal sector and perceived as unjust and too vexing. At stake were the attempts by the government to bring the flows of the informal economy back under state control by introducing new regulation. These measures not only greatly affected the profits of small traders and entrepreneurs, but also increased the discretionary power of corrupt officials over them. The more general issue underlying the Andijan protests revolved around the relationship between powerholders and entrepreneurial middle strata, as the latter were struggling with their businesses while resisting state

recapture. Andijan 2005 left a deep scar in Uzbek society, after which diplomatic relationships with Western democracies deteriorated and the country entered a period of asphyxiating repression that lasted until the death of President Karimov in 2016. With their uncompromising attitude state authorities powerfully demonstrated their firm will to regain state capture over the informal sector. We shall see below how this change in attitude also altered the terms of the tacit Soviet-era compromise or "trading" of informality for political quiescence.

The post-Andijan tensions permeated fieldwork in Namangan in 2009. These tensions were lingering between the struggling middle strata, trying to sustain everyday life with their informalised livelihoods, and a government eager to get a hold over the informal economic processes. Over fieldwork in Namangan, on my daily itinerary to the city's main bazaar, the bad condition of the road was the daily topic of conversation in the *marshrutka*s (minibuses operating as collective taxis on fixed routes). After finding out that *marshrutka* drivers of this route would regularly gather informally to discuss their problems, I also learned that one day drivers resolved, after meeting at the Friday prayer in their *mahalla* mosque, to take the problem in their own hands and, knowing that the city government would not intervene to improve road maintenance, to call for a *hashar* for the renewal of the road. Privately organised public transport with *mashrutka*s had emerged as an important employment sector in Uzbekistan after independence (see: Sgibnev 2014). Despite state attempts at regulation (for example, by introducing flat-rate licences for drivers, etc.), it remained highly informal and variegated. Some individuals in Namangan were said to own dozens of cars and hire drivers, and while some were individual drivers on leased cars, others again were occasional drivers that after work used their own vehicle to earn extra money as part-time drivers. The drivers' *hashar* started successfully and money was being raised. But the petitioning was blocked by the authorities and its organisers were admonished. Checks by the traffic police became more frequent on this road and some cars of known drivers would get checked and fined more assiduously than others. After Andijan, this and similar cases of grassroots activism were feared by city authorities for their political potential and strictly forbidden. The road was not renovated. The *hashar* was called off and drivers acquiesced. But soon thereafter, the city officials granted the drivers of this particular fixed marching route the right to a fare increase.

Such increases had given voice to protests by angry residents in the past, and could even be taken back by authorities, fearful of the voice of the street. But in the tense post-Andijan climate this and similar government efforts to prevent Andijan-type social entrepreneurship "from below" attest to the changed situation. The city residents were made to pay for one category's dissatisfaction by the government's permitting of a fare increase. Here and in similar cases, professional categories (informal or formal) were rewarded for their acquiescence. Drivers stopped the *hashar* out of fear of losing everything, but, in the end, they perceived to have made a gain by refraining from pushing too hard against the city authorities. By so acting, drivers were acknowledging that the informal and precarious nature of their livelihoods did not allow them to voice stronger demands, and also, that informality, the new normal in economy, is profitable to the extent and in the ways that the power holders allow it to be so.

Navigating Everyday Informality in the Ferghana Valley

Uzbekistan is known for being a difficult place for conducting anthropological fieldwork (see for instance: Zanca 2011). Since 1997 I have been observing the evolution of independence in everyday life in Uzbekistan over various fieldwork periods. But in 2009 my last sojourn in Ferghana Valley's Namangan region ended before time when I was halted by the police on the grounds that I stayed overnight in a village I was invited to for a wedding. When a police car picked me up at 5.30 in the morning after the wedding celebration from the house of my embarrassed host, I was taken by surprise. The policemen politely escorted me back to town. At their headquarters, I was reprimanded and my passport confiscated until the payment of a fine of ca. 1000 USD, supposedly for the breach of Uzbek migration law. The same officials who knew about my valid permit to do research on weddings and about my research trips to villages over the previous months suddenly saw me as a criminal offender. I had to sign a handwritten letter declaring my "guilt" and pay the fine or face deportation and the denial of a visa in the future. I left the country a week later, penniless but freely, and with guarantees of open doors to future trips. Nonetheless, I was denied a visa without any reason until 2019, when I eventually re-entered the country, now ruled by a different president, without the need for a visa.

For an innocuous visit to a wedding to turn into a heavily fined breach of the migration code several things had to happen first. 1) A few weeks before my inviting institution, the French research institute IFEAC, had been closed down in Tashkent following diplomatic friction between the presidents of the two countries. 2) Days before my finding, my local mentor, a university teacher working for the government and monitoring my activities (knowing my whereabouts, introducing me to people, etc.), had unequivocally signalled to me that my ethnographic work on the (embarrassing because poor?) village realities that he was putting before my eyes was offending his national feelings. 3) The landlord of the rented apartment in which I lived and was bound to by official registration, a woman related to the city's ruling establishment, had requested the apartment back before the end of the rent for hosting—of all things—a wedding feast (to which I was not invited). This circumstance induced me to go to the village instead, just on the day before I got caught "in flagrante delicto".

Far from being an isolated case among foreign researchers in those years, the episode is nonetheless instructive. However sad and disappointing, it gave me the opportunity to see with my own eyes what Uzbeks knew from their own lives, namely that abiding by the law, even for the well-intentioned, is an arduous undertaking and offers little protection from arbitrary rules and the whims of moody officials. Western observers tend to see the regime's stability based on fear and coercion and to dismiss the national ideology as mere propaganda and to regard people supporting it merely as the regime's thugs. For Rasanayagam (2011a), for instance, the national ideology is a hollow instrument to legitimate authoritarian rule, a mere tool of control, not something people would actually believe in or seriously engage with. Such positions find validation in widely documented narratives of criticism, anger and deep frustration with an essentially oppressive regime (Ilkhamov 2001; Zanca 2011; Liu 2012). And yet, when learning about my mishap my friends and acquaintances in Namangan invited me to show sportsmanship and not to take it personally. Such occurrences resonated with their everyday experience of dealing with an intrusive, extractive state, that many understood nonetheless as a precondition for their livelihoods and as a "necessary evil". My interlocutors in Namangan, more often than not, saw their government as a guarantor for stability, progress and for their perspectives of a better future.

The vicissitudes of Akram (a pseudonym) in securing his livelihood make for a good example for how people in Uzbekistan engage in livelihood strategies straddling the formal/informal divide and yet justify the political order as something necessary, although flawed and corrupt, thereby developing *an attitude of implicit consensus with the system.* After study at the Namangan university where his father was a teacher (*domla*), he abandoned the prospect of a university career illustrated by his father, deeming himself not suited to it. After marrying a girl from the neighbourhood, he started working under his father-in-law in the warehouse of a public company specialised in road construction. This Soviet-era enterprise was not doing well financially and seemed not to prospect a career, but far more lucrative than his modest salary as a junior worker was the money that Akram made by selling Soviet-era mechanical equipment and supplies from the company stock at the bazaar. In a pattern reminiscent of post-socialist privatisations elsewhere, the company heads and their associates appropriated the assets of the public company with the connivance of government officials who were giving their assent and taking advantage from it. Although in our conversations he condemned the corruption of "those up", he did not see himself as acting immorally, because he saw what he did in the company as something inherent to the nature of his job—"this is how all these companies work". In his job, Akram's familial affiliation to senior company officials was more important than his formal employment as a junior worker. After equipment and machinery were sold out the company closed down and Akram began to work temporarily for a low salary as a teacher in the village school where his older brother was the school director. At that time, he would say that he worked as a teacher, while in reality more than ever being involved in business outside the classroom. He was making the real money by growing beetroots on a sizeable plot informally rented from a farmer in the village. After the village's *kolkhoz* farm had been closed down, the land remained in public ownership but long-term tenure rights were granted to farmers (most of them former *kolkhoz* senior staff—directors, agronomists, heads of brigades, etc.) who got valuable land for agricultural use from the state without having to pay for ownership. Instead of paying a rent for tenure, farmers were bound by their leaseholds to grow state mandated crops (cotton) on the largest share of their plots, but they were also left enough land to grow their own crops or to informally sublet land to

local villagers for cash or for a share of the harvest. Land subletting is illegal, strictly speaking, but here, as in Khorezm (Trevisani 2011), it was an informal practice tolerated by local authorities to reward farmers for their loyalty and for the cotton plan fulfilment. Such informal deals could last for a season or more and Akram started this economic venture by informally renting land from a farmer along with a friend. Together, they hired daily labourers, purchased agricultural inputs and, after compensating the farmer with a share of the crop for the use of the plot, they shared the profits from the sale of the harvest at the bazaar. Later on, Akram started in parallel another business with another friend from the *mahalla*. It consisted in importing gas cylinders from Russia, a lucrative trade since in Uzbekistan LPG cars' popularity was growing (gas being cheap in Uzbekistan—a natural gas exporter—while imported petrol was getting more expensive). Bulk purchase and wholesale were in cash and on the spot. The procurement through Kyrgyzstan involved bribes for smuggling the cylinders over the border on a lorry and costs for recon travels to cities in Siberia. (For these trips Akram relied on networks and knowledge established in his youth as a labour migrant when working in different odd jobs obtained through acquaintances from his village.) In the village, the gas cylinders would be stored in a privately owned cattle-shed once owned by the *kolkhoz*. Their distribution in the regional bazaars involved other informal payments and intermediation, and was accomplished through friends in the *mahalla*.

Akram's "enterprise" was totally informal, its business model based on trustful handshakes. Facilitated by a web of friends and acquaintances and kinship, it thrived in the grey zone between the formal and informal economy, and was shaped by formal rules and their circumvention. His livelihood efforts demonstrate a fluid and overlapping set of informal strategies that illustrate the pervasive informalisation (Rasanayagam 2011b), yet what attitudes, moral and political, did this all produce in him?

Rationalising the "Dominant" Form of Integration

Akram's livelihood allowed for average means, but these were never a reason for complaint. He would always say about himself that he had everything, that he was happy with his life and the opportunities that *mustaqillik* (independence) had opened up to him. His three sons were

growing up and their expensive *to'y*s (life cycle celebrations, a social obligation that weighs on parents who typically will save money over years to have it spent over one lavish feast) would be provided for by him, and thanks to the support of friends and relatives. His criticism wasn't directed against national independence, but against the systemic corruption of the powerful public officials that came with it. He would talk badly about the public prosecutors, the money-extorting police and the university teachers, who in his view were all corrupt and drunkards (and bad Muslims). To him, the low appeal of the public sector was not only because those who work there were seen by him as immoral, exploiting their positions for their own interests, but also because their low salaries made it arduous for them to live without stealing. In his view, "work for the state" (*davlat ishi*), as opposed to "work for oneself" (private business) was conducive to an immoral life. He saw himself as "free" ("*hech kimga bo'ysunmayman*"—"I don't have to obey to anyone"), whereas the *domla*s and those who "work for the state" must obey their superiors and embrace a sinful, corrupt existence.

Akram, who was in his first university year in the period of Adolat, and whom I have known since 1997, in a conversation in spring 2009 confessed to me that in his youth he had had critical thoughts about the regime but that he had reconciled with the social order and with the president. Unchecked criticism would only lead to anarchy. In his opinion, people in Andijan had been misled. Retrospectively, recalling memories of the people rallying on the square in front of the *hokimiyat* (city government building) in Namangan in 1992, he thought of them as a "herd of sheep" ("*poda*")—"they were not thinking by themselves, whoever might come and say something, that's what they would be doing." In his narrative, the president was a very acute thinker, who foreigners from the West failed to understand:

> The relationship among our countries has been cooling down? The nature of commerce is interest, and not good deeds, and if foreigners want to invest in our country, it is for profit, not for our well-being. But the president does not want to sell out the country. We'll do it our way. It will take longer [i.e., to reach development], but we'll do it.

While Akram "muddles through" with different informal employments and entrepreneurial activities, he maintains a happy-go-lucky take on the economic problems of existence and views his real wealth and

safety in his family and web of friends (*inoq*) and relatives, which make his life rich and fulfilling. A sense of frustration about the increasingly difficult livelihood struggle, the loss of formal securities and protected employment which came with the Soviet Union, was easier to find among the representatives of generations older than Akram's. By contrast, Akram's moral reasoning around the informalisation of livelihoods and around the political and economic framework that made it possible, emphasised a contentedness for entrepreneurial freedoms and the securities of having a strong fulfilment from his local (rooted in family and friends in the *mahalla*) and national sense of belonging. Such and similar narratives by people who had entered adulthood over the years of independence (and were not alienated by economic failure and hardship!) attest to an acceptance of the current situation, but also to a moral numbness and collusion with the "dominant" form of integration, an unwillingness to challenge the given order and a readiness to come to terms with it as best as possible.

Authoritarian Mode of Integration

Evaluating the level of consent under repressive conditions is always problematic and not just in the case of Central Asian authoritarian countries (Matveeva 2009). Some help can be found in the historiography of Italian fascism, where intense debating on the nature and the social backing of the regime in the so-called pre-war "years of consent" (De Felice 1974) has resulted in a distinction between *consent* and *consensus* (Morgan 1999; Kim 2009). While the narrower notion of consent applies with reference to the appraisal of a government by its political constituencies, the more encompassing notion of consensus has its roots in the Gramscian notion of hegemony and addresses more broadly how social stability and cohesion can be created and maintained through measures that work at the level of ordinary people's attitudes and everyday practices (see: Berezin 1997; Passerini 1987). The distinction between consent and consensus helps address contradictory subjectivities, since a lack of consent does not necessarily translate into an absence of consensus and political disaffection with the status quo can coexist in the same person with the sustaining of beliefs and practices that support it. This distinction is apt in the repressive environment of the Ferghana Valley, where people like Akram could morally distance

themselves from a corrupt political order but at the same time recognise its necessity and sustain it, or in other words, distance themselves from "consent" but practice "consensus". In fascist Italy the middle classes were a heterogeneous group, with uncertain class boundaries and unsteady political inclinations. They were disparate in their social and economic interests and only unified in their quest for order and stability. Nevertheless, they were of crucial importance to the regime, and yet their support was neither unambiguous nor unconditional, a reason why the state had to adopt a plurality of rhetoric and political strategies to keep its hegemonic grip on them (Berezin 1997). The state incorporated them ideologically, through an ideology of class "harmony", and practically, through the doctrine of "corporatism", by which professions, economic sectors, interest groups and virtually all organised activity in the public sphere were organised in confederations, top-down modelled on the artisanal guilds (de Grazia 1981).

The post-Soviet Uzbek state is confronted with similar problems and the solutions adopted are also similar. Soviet organisations and institutions often changed in name only in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, while the government has resorted to a plurality of context-specific strategies to recapture the informal sector and to bring it under its oversight. After independence, the type of command structure that organised the once inflated and state-subsidised socialised sector has been maintained in a more dilute form, but now the power holders faced the problem of how to keep the ranks of the command-administrative system built in Soviet times under these new, more informalised and less attractive conditions. Under the long presidency of Karimov, the state strengthened ways to maintain a workable command hierarchy through more indirect levers.

Public employees have comparatively low salaries but often they have the security of life-long employment. Their jobs are also becoming more prestigious, since the re-strengthening of the public sector confers more importance on those public officials who can exert power in their workplaces. But, as often lamented by public sector workers: "work for the state never ends", additional tasks, extraordinary assignments, the "cotton duty",[4] obligations towards the superiors, and the dedication to

4 At the time of my fieldwork, it consisted in the monitoring of the cotton harvest, when public sector workers, officials, and students were called to abandon their tasks, relocate to the cotton fields and help with the harvest by either picking cotton or monitoring those picking it.

a demanding work sociality that can be at times pleasant and fulfilling, and at others a burden, are the unofficial price for the rewards that public sector employment can entail. The possibility of taking bribes, moonlighting or exerting influence, which can turn public sector jobs into powerful, remunerative positions, is not evenly distributed and is reflected in a workplace hierarchy in which inequalities in wages, formal rights and other, more informal entitlements have also grown.

Outside the realm of public employment, private entrepreneurship underwent a similar process and faces similar dilemmas. In agriculture, for instance, the state has retreated from the production process after decollectivisation, but it has long maintained control over retail, credit, inputs, and has thereby retained the ability to steer the sector through indirect levers (Trevisani 2011). At the intermediate level of the production hierarchy, cotton is attractive to farmers not because of its low procurement prices but because it offers securities and stability within the framework set by the state. Within this formal framework farmers can manipulate agricultural resources to their advantage and use land more profitably on the side to the extent that government officials let them do so. Analogously, in the bazaars, although more market freedoms have been introduced, the state keeps a cap on the possibility of profit making by introducing high taxes and many rules and licences that hamper business. Their exemption, or discretionary application or verification by enforcement organs, plays a crucial role in the profitability of a business, and marks the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful entrepreneur.

As in Akram's case, the middle strata navigate this system with ambivalence, on the one hand lamenting corruption, and on the other accepting, even internalising, the rules of the game. In both public and private sectors, whether one turns out to be a "winner" or a "loser" (Hann et al. 2003) depends on one's individual capacity to work out the available conditions. After the 1990s, the second decade of independence has been one in which informal livelihoods have been increasingly re-formalised by a more alert and capillary presence of the state in the economic domain. The Soviet state saw the informal sector as undermining its power over the economy (as most vividly exemplified with the case of the "cotton scandal"); in post-Soviet Uzbekistan the state has re-integrated the private sector, which is no longer parasitic

to state capture as it used to be in Soviet times. Nowadays the state "squeezes'' the private sector to pursue its interests and priorities. Its taxation supports the national budget, an infrastructure modernisation programme creating jobs, and the financing of a no longer all-enveloping, but nevertheless newly bolstered, public sector.

The middle strata, in this context, be it those who "work for the state", or those "who work for themselves", are those to whom the regime confers or allows to occupy an intermediate position in the new social hierarchy. Middle strata might complain about increasingly difficult livelihood struggles, unfair treatment, an exploitative and repressive environment. At the same time, many benefit from the relative securities and certainties that the state has to offer to those who cooperate. The gains and opportunities provided by the informal economy became more attentively monitored by the authorities. Access to these informal gains (i.e. the possibility of making them) has become an informal compensation by which the regime secures the cooperation or loyalty of its low- and middle-level affiliates in the public and private sectors. By co-opting people through mechanisms grounded in a manipulative use of the informal economy, the regime shapes the "consensus" of a significant segment of the population. Mabel Berezin (1990) has written that the Italian middle classes were "created constituencies", fable, heterogeneous constituencies created by the political economy of the corporatist state. By comparison, Uzbek middle strata are no less heterogeneous and unstable. They have emerged from the political economy of the independent state, one in which the role of informality continues to be central, both for the public and the private sectors.

A Moral Economy of Consensus and Informality

In this paper I have attempted to examine the moral and political sensibilities of the middle strata in Uzbekistan in the decade that began after Andijan 2005 and ended with the Karimov presidency in 2016 from a moral economy perspective. Since the beginning of the new presidency under Karimov's successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the country seems to be moving towards an expansion and better protection of market freedoms for the entrepreneurial individual (Schmitz 2020). This process is just beginning and at this stage it raises many questions that

future studies will need to address empirically. But going back to the Karimov era, we can say that the creation of a politically opportunistic and unstable social constituency, shaped by the relationship between authoritarianism and informality, can be viewed as one of the legacies outlasting this period. We have seen that although informal practices have become more pervasive, informalisation did not level out formal rules. The government's attempt at re-capturing the informal sector has seen the middle strata internalising peculiar values and habits that were formed under protracted years of "consensus" and that have increased their adaptiveness to the authoritarian informal economic framework that has emerged after independence.

A comparison of the Uzbekistan case with Hann's work on Hungary is instructive. In both cases we see strong reactions to the market in the form of right-leaning populisms and authoritarian countermovements (against which Polanyi at his time was already warning). In both cases, they have emerged as a reaction to dominant forms of global market integration that have been marginalising ordinary citizens in weaker national economies. But on closer scrutiny, the local convergences of interests and values between elites and ordinary citizens develop in different directions in Uzbekistan and in Hungary: Hungary accounts for a case in which pre-existing values (material work) that resonate with local legacies and deep-rooted understandings of community life are recuperated and instrumentalised by populist elites for modern workfare policies managing the rift between market and society in a way that sits well with the elites; in Uzbekistan, we see how the integrative force of the informal economy is demiurgic in shaping new values and attitudes in society and, by extension, creating a new social stratum, that of the "new Uzbeks" (Trevisani 2014). A lesson from this exercise in comparison could perhaps be, as Chris Hann (2018) suggests, that the moral dimension of the political economy matters more than ever. As he draws our attention to how populisms tap into historically shaped values that resonate with people's lived experiences and moral horizons, he also invites us to address the question of peoples' contradictory consciousness in relation to authoritarian and populist post-socialist systems with a perspective that puts the moral dimension of the economy at the centre of our analysis.

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