



EMPTY WINDOWS AND EMPTY LIVES: POST-SOVIET DISCONTINUITIES OF KYRGYZSTAN'S EMPTY-TOWNS

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Emptiness is the starting point.
In order to taste my cup of water you must first empty your cup.
My friend, drop all of your preconceived ideas and be neutral.
Do you know why this one is useful?
Because it is empty.
Bruce Lee.

Introduction

Imagine a wide river slowly carrying its waters and people on a boat across the even flat plain. Sun is high, breeze is refreshing and scenery is beautiful – people are in the condition of bliss and peace. Suddenly the river is reaching the edge of the plain and a great drop of altitudes brings to their view a magnificent and breath-taking waterfall. Huge masses of water are falling down fractured into zillions of small drops and people on the boat are falling into the deep and dangerous unknown, lungs full-screaming and hearts exploding. Collapse of the Soviet Union was similar in the experience. The pace of Soviet life was very slow, scheduled, planned. People's lives were predictable within the bounds of commonly accepted patterns of work, career and family developments. They were to study and work moderately, retire and have respectable old age. There were not many signs of a coming turmoil (Yurchak, 2006). Perhaps, on a macro-scale "from above" collapse of the Soviet Union was something inevitable or predictable, but on a micro-scale of individual lives it came as a complete surprise: unexpected and life-threatening. Not all made it through the crisis and those who did were in the state of an after-shock for long time.

Sudden collapses are very different from gradual transformations. If the latter result in continuing metamorphoses, the former leave lots of vacuums: spaces, which are dead or uninhabited. Depending on how embedded these spaces were in the old geographies, they can either remain empty for a long time or they can be filled with new influences and contents forming hybrid spaces, where elements of the old obtain new meanings and forms. Collapses and crises are two of many other forms of discontinuities, which can be manifested in economic, cultural or physical forms. This paper builds the link between such discontinuities and the concept of emptiness.

Soviet Union was a very unique project artificially constructed on the top of existing landscape. When it was built, it itself destroyed and modified many features of the old geography leaving empty spaces of the pre-Soviet traditions and filling them with new Soviet contents. Its energy and might were so powerful and its imagination so wild that it produced totally different, almost alien landscapes with objects of strange shape, developments with strange patterns and people with strange lives. There are very few communities in the history of humankind, which are similar to the Soviet experience in the scale and transformative social and cultural dimension. Soviet Union created unique unprecedented economic, political, socio-cultural and ideological spaces and for three generations of people these spaces became strongly embedded in their lives. The suddenness of Soviet collapse and crisis produced unique empty spaces, many of which remain empty even twenty years after the collapse.

This paper analyzes the concept of emptiness on the example of the former industrial towns in Kyrgyzstan – previously known as Central Asian periphery of the Soviet Union. Looking at the economy, demographics and cultural memory of these towns, it portrays the moods, narratives and daily patterns of these last frontiers, distant fort-posts of the Soviet Empire. Conceptually, this paper connects the phenomenon of emptiness to the process of historic, spatial and cultural discontinuities, which characterize modernism, modernity and modernization. Soviet emptiness was an important element of the Soviet modernity, while the post-Soviet emptiness was an outcome of the active process of disembodiment imprinted in the Soviet schemes of modernization. To understand the Soviet and Post-Soviet emptiness we need to reconstruct it as an element of modernity and as an outcome of modernization.

Emptiness as Element of Modernity and Outcome of Modernization

Modernism, modernity and modernization are interrelated terms describing the Enlightenment project that characterized the main principles of development in the West in the last couple of centuries. There are several ways in which we can connect the concept of emptiness to the modernist thought and action. The approach that is proposed in this paper – is to look at the emptiness as a result of various kinds of discontinuities and in this section we start this by looking at the modernism from the development, economic, cultural and urban design perspective.

From the development perspective, modernization is a break from tradition. The key engine of the development is the idea of progress, which is rhetorically and conceptually constructed as the opposite of tradition. Technological progress, education, and secularism in modernization perspective are portrayed as necessary elements for any society to develop. To achieve that progress nations (nation itself being the main products of modernity) must break from the historic traditions, communal lifestyles, religious practices, etc. Walter Rostow (1960), one of the main proponents of the modernization theory described several stages on the course toward progress and development: traditional society being the starting point and fully developed high consumer society its main final destination. Measures proposed by the modernization theory are often very radical: there is no point of sticking to the past; developing societies must look forward. Breaking from the past – is the key modern remedy to all societal ills. Modernism sees progress as linear rather than cyclical and from the linear perspective there is no return to the past and even though Rostow's stages of development are portrayed as gradual, they are anyhow strongly discontinuing.

It is not that one tradition is being replaced by another tradition – modernization kills the notion of tradition itself and since there is no replacement the death of tradition is emptiness.

From the economic perspective, modernism is associated with processes of industrialization/Fordism and post-industrialization/post-Fordism. Industrialization in the beginning of the 20th century reached the levels of mass production. Frederick Taylor came up with the principles of scientific management of production and Henry Ford introduced the assembly line. The key agents of mass production were a mass worker and a mass consumer (Allen, 1997) while its main spatial outcome was the growth of many industrial cities along the American Sunbelt. Similar developments were taking place in other parts of the world; in Africa for example it was seen in the growth of cities in 70-s and 80-s along the African copper-belt. The Soviet industrial experience was not very different: large-scale mass industries were the key features of the Soviet economy and similar to other places around the world, large number of new industrial and mining cities and towns were built all across the Soviet Union, including its Central Asian periphery.

The post-Fordist change in the late 20th century brought the collapse of mass-producing factories, shift to flexible production and knowledge economy, decline of the welfare state and aggressive neo-liberal politics. The outcome of this change was another major rupture and discontinuity on national and even global scales and the growth of the new phenomenon – “ghost”-towns – former industrial settlements deserted because of the collapse of industries. The greatest example is the city of Detroit, which used to be the famous home to Ford’s General Motors company and had bursting population, but today is a run-down half-empty settlement with only memories of its glorious past.

James Ferguson’s descriptions of declining cities of the Zambian Copper-belt are very similar portraits of the post-Fordist collapse. His book *Expectations of Modernity* (1999) is a rich ethnography of decline describing counter-urbanization, de-industrialization, and even de-Zambianization of Zambia’s mining towns. These towns used to be the embodiments of the modernization promise, moving full speed towards progress and better standards of living to join the global capitalist community. But the promise turned to be a modernization myth, in the full ambiguity of the term: both as a false vision of the urban Africa and as a meaning making category shaping “people’s experiences and interpretations of their lives” (p.14). Ferguson describes how the change of global communication technologies resulted in the fall of demand for copper and in the collapse of Zambian industries leading to unemployment and impoverishment of the population in these towns. The author notes that Zambian crisis was not just an economic crisis, but the crisis of meaning: “When I tried to get from [informants] an insiders’ view of their social world, what I found resembled less a stable, systemic order of knowledge than a tangle of confusion, chaos and fear” (p.19). The author concludes his book with a statement that for Zambians the process of modernization was not the one of joining the world, but the one of “being thrown aside, expelled, or discarded” by the global capitalism “into the ranks of the “second class”, cast outward and downward into the world of rugs and huts where the color bar had always told “Africans” they belonged” (p.236).

This focus on the crisis of meaning brings us to the third perspective – cultural. Stuart Hall (1997) conceptualizes a similar notion as a crisis and fragmentation of modern identity. He calls this process “dislocation” or “de-centering of individuals from their place in the social and cultural

world and from themselves" (p.597). According to him, essentialist identities of the enlightened subject, centered and unified, are shifting towards a more sociological subject, whose identity is formed in the interaction between self and society, and finally to a post-modern subject, who has fragmented and unresolved identities and where the process of identification is "more open-ended, variable and problematic". He gives a historical account of how the modern subject was de-centered: first through Marx's shift of focus from the individual Man to social relations; then through Freud's "discovery of unconscious"; then through De Saussure's work on the deconstruction of language; Foucault's discourse on disciplinary power; and finally, through feminism as accumulative term for various types of social movements. If we employ Hall's concepts of dislocation and de-centering of identity to our discussion of discontinuities, we can conceptually envision spaces emerging between fragmented segments of post-modern identity as elements of identity gaps and raptures, elements of emptiness.

Finally, we can look at the creation of literally empty spaces from the perspective of modernist aesthetics reflected in the modernist urban design and architecture. James Scott (1998) in his chapter on the High Modernist City portrays how the ideas of such influential modern architects like Le Corbusier and Oscar Nimeyer were advocating for another discontinuity by designing cities, which were making no compromises with the existing contexts. There was no place for the *past* in their visions. Everything old had to be bulldozed and made available for new forms and spaces. Homes were becoming "machines for living" and towns "workshops for production". Two cities serve as examples of completely newly built modern cities: Brasilia, the capital of Brazil designed by Oscar Nimeyer, and Chandigarh, city in the Indian Punjab, designed by Le Corbusier. Scott describes the failures of these realizations and shows how pure modernist aesthetics produced "dead" empty spaces of enormous scale, which were not suited for humans, only for cars: anonymity and architectural uniformity and repetition of the urban environment with no place for residents to have social life.

These huge open spaces, such as the Plaza of Three Powers in Brasilia designed from the distant master-plan vision, in spite of being un-humanistic, had the power of persuasion of the simplified rationality and became common elements of many forms of the modern cities in different parts of the world producing vast empty spaces of highways, parking lots, anonymous consumer spaces of shopping malls and skylines of modern downtowns. Similarly the Soviet industrialization schemes "tamed nature" (Scott's term) by building towns in the deserts, while the Soviet communist party manifested its presence in the cities through enormous central squares with the monuments of Lenin and administrative building forming the silhouettes of Soviet modernization all across the Soviet Union, including Central Asia. These squares hosted parades and celebrations with thousands of people, but on the regular days they were meant to suppress the individual agency and subordinate it to the power of Communist party.

What effect did these empty urban spaces have on human psycho? Kathryn Milun in her book *Pathologies of Modern Space* describes how such forms of urban emptiness affected the public self of urban residents. She analyzes how these *non-spaces* of modernity affect the psychological well-being of urban residents. She uses concepts of *horror vacui* – fear of emptiness and *agoraphobia* – fear of open space as peculiar kinds of mental disorders triggered by the open spaces of modern cities. She also suggests that "empty space in modernity is not only a feature of the built environment, but also an imaginal structure... Indeed a "central vacuity" appears to be emerging as

a characteristics, organizing feature of the narration of the modern city” (p.11). In the application to the broader concept of modernism she suggests that:

Essential to our understanding of modern thought is the fact that empty space is a structure of modern urban being, an unrepresentable phenomenon that is increasingly sensed through anxiety (p.259).

We will return to Milun’s description of empty space as a trigger of psychological disorders to discuss the effects of emptiness in the ghost-towns of Kyrgyzstan. For now let us summarize some major conclusions from this brief theoretical overview of modern discontinuities and resulting emptiness.

We saw *discontinuity* as an inherent principle of modernity reflected in the intentional disconnection from *tradition*, post-Fordist collapse of industries in many parts of the world, ruptures and fragmentation of modern identities, and ignorance of historic urban context in the modernist urban design schemes. We also saw how these discontinuities of modernity enacted in various projects of modernization produced different kinds of emptiness: death of tradition, ghost-towns, crisis of meaning and identity, and empty spaces of modern cities triggering psychological anxieties. Emptiness in this analysis becomes a value-laden concept. This is reflected even in the key words describing it, such as *crisis, death, anxiety, disorder*, and James Ferguson’s “terrible sense of sadness”. Can we then think of emptiness as karma of modernity? Or should we invite it as a witness in the court proceedings against modernism? And the easy answer might be: *It depends ... depends on the context*. This paper is going to proceed by bringing this concept of modern emptiness into the mountains of Kyrgyzstan – the very edge of the Empire of the Soviet Modernity.

Empty-Towns

During the Soviet time, all Soviet republics were connected into one industrial network established in such a way that peripheral zones of the Soviet Union, including Central Asian republics were used mostly for the production of raw-materials, which were then transported to Russia where all major manufacturing plants were located. In Kyrgyzstan, a couple of dozens of small towns were built, often from scratch. Most of them were located in the remote mountainous areas. Because of the peculiarities of the Soviet industrial system, many of these industries, mostly mining, were not profitable and had to be subsidized by Moscow and subsidized they were. These towns were on a complete direct provision from Moscow and in the time of general deficit of consumer products, these towns had goods which were not possible to find even in the capital city. In addition, miners and factory workers in these towns had salaries, which were several times higher than in other places. So, these cities were bursting with life, having all necessary infrastructure, facilities, hospitals, entertainment, etc. People were working hard, being proud of their belonging and looking forward to their retirement.

With the collapse of Soviet Union and its industrial networks the center in Moscow was no longer interested in subsidizing these unprofitable industries. Within a matter of two-three years industries were frozen and mines closed in most of these towns. The prospects for future were grim and most workers recognized that. The first reaction of the population who in their majority were Russian was to emigrate to Russia or to the capital Bishkek. The largest number of residents left in

these early years after the collapse. Some towns were emptied to almost one tenth of their former population.

Mines and factories were privatized. Privatization process was taking place similarly to privatization in other parts of the former Soviet Union. Allina-Pisano (2008) describes how

Land privatization in the Black Earth is not a case of underfulfillment of a plan, or of local state institutions that lacked the ability to carry out a policy. Instead local state officials with the help of farm directors, deliberately constructed a façade of *de jure* rights while pursuing an entirely different and demonstrably contrary set of goals – namely, the preservation of large-scale agriculture, in which farm directors would control land resources and local state oversight would continue to play an important role. (p.5) Impoverished populations now hold documents entitling their holders to unspecified plots of land, and where more powerful actors choose to step in and lease (and as national legislation allows it, purchase) large tracts of land, rural people will have little practical choice but to relinquish their rights in exchange for whatever small sum may be offered (p.27).

In a very similar way special schemes were developed and introduced in the early 90-s for the privatization of mines and factories in the small towns of Kyrgyzstan. According to these schemes, they were privatized more or less equally among all workers and shares – *aktcii* – were given to everybody. But as majority of workers were leaving, their shares were bought for a very small price by the local authorities and many of those who stayed, seeing no hope for the recovery and living in misery conditions were forced by circumstances to do the same. Many of our informants told us that they had shares but they sold them for “nothing” since there was little hope for the recovery of industries. Others just forgot about them. Some still have these shares. As a result, almost in all towns factories and mines became property of the local elite. New owners however didn’t have much hope for the recovery of these industries either; they were not looking far-ahead and in the context of the overall political chaos used their chance to gain short-term benefits. They demolished and sold factory buildings as bricks and they sold the high-tech machinery to Chinese entrepreneurs at the price of metal.

Empty and half- or fully demolished factories were among the first visual manifestations of discontinuities and emptiness. There were many more to follow. I have divided the main ethnographic description based on the research completed in six of these towns (Ak-Tyuz, Kadi-Sai, Tash-Komur, Kok-angak, Mailu-Suu and Sulyuktu) at different times in the period from 2008 to 2011 into two parts: in the first part called *Empty Windows* I portray spatial discontinuities and in the second part called *Empty Lives* I describe emptiness as a tragedy of the *post-* existence. In this paper I propose the new term “empty-towns” against commonly used concept of “ghost-towns”. This does not have literal, but rather symbolical associations, which are uncovered in the following sections.

Empty Windows

The “wild privatization” was not only affecting the state enterprises. Apartment buildings and houses were privatized too. In this case, as Nazypary (2002) confirms in his research of the post-Soviet chaos in Kazakhstan, the “dispossessed” benefited from privatization and obtained the governmental apartments they lived in private ownership. However, because of the emigration of

such large number of residents, many new owners sold their property to the richer residents or to businessmen from outside. The buildings however were not purchased with a purpose of living there or renting it. The main purpose was the dissembling of buildings into bricks and elements of construction, such as doors and window frames. The regular scheme would be to purchase all apartments in one wing of the apartment building and start demolishing it, and then keep moving until the whole building is taken into pieces. The tragedy and the irony was that bricks were more expensive than the whole buildings. This can be seen as almost “too literal” example of the post-modern process of fragmentation.

Some of these building, usually houses, not apartment buildings, were even demolished by the people who lived in them because they were leaving and they could not sell their houses. These people were moving for good – creating yet another discontinuity in their life – and they were erasing any memories of their presence in these towns – leaving more discontinuities to those who remained. This was one revengeful take on the failed promise of the Soviet modernity.

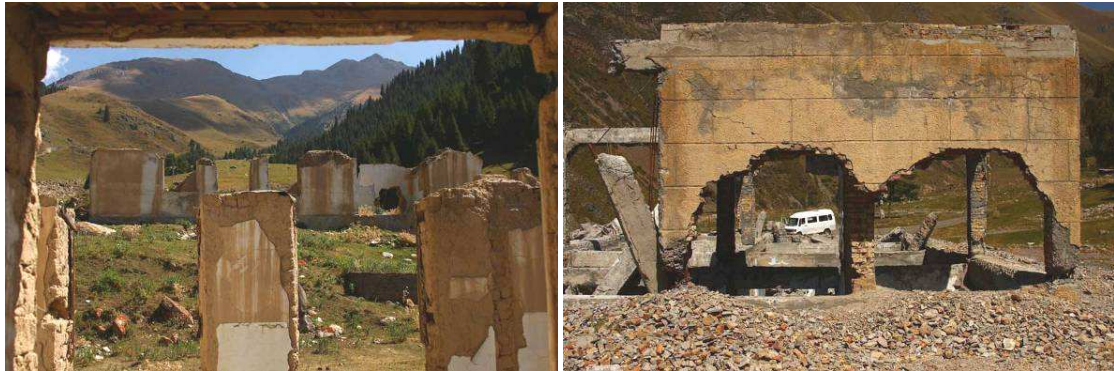
In the cases when buildings are purchased by the outsiders, they usually hire locals to do the dissembling work. That is another tragedy – having no sources of income, the locals are forced by circumstance to agree and deconstruct with their own hands the environment, which was so dear to them. One of our informants in Kok-Jangak was a construction worker during the Soviet times. He built most of the thee- and four-storey apartments in town and now seeing how everything he built is being demolished on daily basis made him very sad. But when it is the matter of survival, it is accepted. Image 1 shows how locals are involved in the cleaning of bricks from the demolished building.



Everything is cleaned after up after the dissembling. For example, it is common for children to become engaged in the collection of metal crap, which is bought by some local entrepreneurs and later sold to China. One Russian lady during an evening interview in Kok-Jangak said that her five-year-old son was at that moment collecting metal in the local river with his friends and were he to bring anything they would buy a loaf of bread for dinner, otherwise they would go to sleep hungry.

This process of dissembling and deconstruction is symbolical of the deconstruction of meaning, loss of hope and psychological anxieties often leading to drinking. Living in the ruins is not easy, especially when these are ruins of one’s own past. The emptiness in spatial memories of residents can be seen in the frequent references to some ruins, like “There was a wonderful club in this place. We used to come here to watch movies and dance. Now there is only a foundation left”. One lady in Ak-Tyuz took us to the ruins of the hospital and showed us a room where she gave birth to two of

her children. She pointed to all other rooms and explained where she slept, where they ate and rooms of doctors and nurses. The walls stayed because they were made of clay bricks. Through the openings of the ruins we were looking at the beautiful mountainous scenery and through the opening in the ruins of a former shop a minibus taking people to the nearest center once a day (see image 2).



Ruined were not only the buildings, but also the town infrastructure. The strongest ethnographic imprint from our trip to the Vostochnyi rayon of Sulyuktu town was a very strong and pervasive smell of human waste. It was everywhere: on the streets and inside the apartments. The local sewage system was not working for several years and we saw a human waste in a liquid form flowing from the pit in front of the apartment building and into the garden of one of its residents (image 3). Fat green flies were flying around it.



Residents of the five-storey buildings in Kok-Jangak had a very similar problem. The sewage system inside the apartments was not working for few years and they were all going to a ground toilet in the yard. But one thing when a family living in a small plot using its own toilet, but totally different when residents of four five-storey buildings (even though more than half-empty) were using one toilet. The sewage collector track came time to time to suck out the waste, but not as often as it was needed. Besides very obvious problems of anti-sanitary conditions, threat of infections and smell that is so omnipresent and hard to get used to, waste has its negative connotations and specific cultural meanings attached to it. "You can see", said an old man in Vostochnyi with a very sad irony, "we literally live in sheet".

Another major problem for many of these towns is water. In Vostochnyi, the water is absent throughout the day and is given only for an hour early in the morning from one *kolonka* (street

water fountain). People are queuing for that source of water with their baskets while it is still dark and if their luck runs bad and water is turned off before they manage to fill their baskets, they will be left without water until next morning.

Finally, electricity is an important element of towns' infrastructure that is often mentioned. There are frequent power shortages and if it is in the evening the town *lovit tishinu* (catches silence). Many informants often remembered how bright the streets of their settlements were in the Soviet time: "You could go anywhere in the middle of the night; every street was lit and it was bright like in a day time. Today I am afraid to get out of my house in the dark, there is no single light in the street" (lady in Ak-Tyuz). Darkness can be seen as an element of emptiness. It forces people into their apartments and isolates them from others. It might not be a problem in the village, where families are quite large, but in these towns, where the majority of residents are lonely elderly, this is quite depressive and disconnecting.

However, in these towns darkness comes not only at night. There is another form of it – the darkness of empty windows in the apartment buildings. Those buildings, which survived demolition, are often occupied only to a very small degree. It is common to see a four-five-storey apartment buildings with only four-five families living in it, the rest of the windows being broken, window frames taken out and only dark window openings remaining as witnesses to how many residents have left the town. While the buildings are still intact, their image can be even more depressing than one of the ruins: if buildings are demolished, they just disappear from one's sight with the foundations slowly being covered by dirt and grass, while empty windows on the contrary give very clear visual indication and reminder about how empty the town is (image 4).



Some residents appropriate the empty apartments and use them as storage spaces. One family in Ak-Tyuz made a small factory where they conserved and preserved mushrooms. But quite frequently people try to close these dark empty openings in their buildings with different kinds of materials as a last resort action against the aggressiveness of their darkness (image 5).



Visually these spaces are very surreal, but the field experiences are quite surreal too. One reason for that is in the high radiation from the tailing sites in some of these cities (Ak-Tyuz, Mailu-Suu, Kadji-Sai), which contain the radioactive waste. A day in such town makes you dizzy for a week. But what is even more surreal is the life of local population. There is a myth that if you drink hundred gram of vodka everyday it will kill the effect of radiation. Nobody confirmed the myth true or wrong, but it certainly kills one's liver and turns a person into a drunk. Those who wanted and could move did so. The remaining are either too old or too poor to move. One woman in Min-Kush said her parents and husband died from cancer, she has cancer and all four of her children have gutter. She would be happy to leave, but she doesn't have means to do so.

Other people are too attached to the places, where many of them were born and spent all of their life. But it is not only places, but also the memories. What contributes to the surrealism of the situation is that people in these towns live like if the time since the collapse was frozen for them. All they talk about is how good it was during the Soviet period and how bad it is now. The majority of even elderly population in bigger towns and in villages moved on long time ago. Some are going full-speed towards the Western style capitalism and consumerism, but not in the ghost-towns. These places can be called ghost-towns not only because there are no people there, but also because these places and these people themselves exist like ghosts of the past, the last living monuments of the communist ideology, the living ruins of the Empire. And that is why even when most of the factories, apartments and public buildings are demolished, nobody touches the monuments of Lenin. In the following slides you can see the collection of images of the Lenin statues from different ghost-towns. Weather and time have some effect, but you never see vandalism, spray painting or intentional destruction. The past is respected here (image 6).



The descriptions of space given in this section portray discontinuities and emptiness of the environment in the form of ruins, half-demolished buildings, dysfunctional infrastructure, darkness of nights and darkness of empty windows. These kinds of spatial emptiness are loaded with meanings and emotions. This paper earlier made a mention of Kathryn Mulan's (2007) discussion of pathological effects of the empty spaces of contemporary cities on the psychology of their residents. Although residents of Kyrgyzstan's empty-towns experience a slightly different kind of emptiness, it is no less oppressive and debilitating. The evidence of that comes in the strong presence of alcoholism for example. It was quite common to see drunk men and women, often of the respectable age in the streets of these towns. What strikes an outsider is the despair and hopelessness of many facial expressions. Empty towns and empty buildings cannot but have their imprint on people. Would it be an exaggeration to say that they are mirrored in the empty faces and empty lives? The next section will look into this question in more details.

Empty Lives

This paper portrays emptiness as a result of discontinuity. The period of 1991-93 crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union can be seen as the main breaking point that divided the lives of people in these towns into two major temporal categories: *before* and *after*. These two concepts became the categories for the construction of meaning and identity for them. Emptiness then can be portrayed both as the enormous gap between them and as the main feature of the *after*. Exploration of this contrast, so vividly present in the narratives of residents, can help us better understand the relation between modernity and post-modernity and the meaning of the *post-* in relation to the ways people made sense of their reality and of themselves.

In a brief, the live before was wonderful and the life after became miserable. To portray the differences between them this research draws on the narratives of informants who twenty years later still remember minute details of the life before and continuously contrast them with the life after. This paper explores these discontinuities in people's lives across several domains: social life, work, identity formation, well-being, and ideology. If in the previous section, images provided strong visual support to the arguments made, this section has more space for people's own voices as they seem to convey not only the nature of change, but also their personal emotions associated with them.

Work

Work was the main identity marker for these towns. Contrary to other settlements these were created around specific kinds of production and mining and they were maintained by the center in Moscow purely because of their contribution to the Soviet industry. With the collapse of industry came the collapse of these towns' identity. Mentioning of the amount and kind of work the residents did in the old times was always followed by the complaints about current universal unemployment.

We had a wonderful factory. Our products were famous not only in the Soviet Union, but also in India, China and Japan. We were producing diodes. But when these people were given power – they stole everything; it is a pity. (Russian woman, Kadji-Sai).

We all worked; there was even a shortage of labor. Now, the majority are unemployed. (Russian woman, Kadji-Sai).

We all worked: from young to elderly. If somebody didn't work, the militia man would come and arrest you. Now people want to work and they have skills and education, but there is no work. (Kyrgyz man, Ak-Tyuz).

The Soviet work in these towns was always referred to with a sense of pride:

Everything third bullet during the WWII was made from our lead. (Kyrgyz woman, Ak-Tyuz).

The volumes of mining were really large in the Soviet times. Up to 200.000 tones of coal were dug every day. The train used to come from Jalalbad 5 times per day to take that coal. The coal was taken to Frunze, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In those times, there was a technical college in Kok-Jangak, where young people were invited here to study mining and then after completion they would remain here to work. At that time there was a dormitory. Later they were given apartments or land to build houses. There was a sewing factory, which worked from 1969 to 1994. It provided work places for 800 women. The factory was producing technical clothes (спецодежда) and later sleep-ware. (Uzbek Man, Kok-Jangak).

The scale and volume of work compares very positively with the present miser strategies of survival:

There is no work. We can only earn by disassembling houses. One brick costs 25 tyiyn. In one day I can earn 30-40 som. One loaf of bread costs 14 som. I also buy three potatoes and three onions and this is our food for a day. When there is no work, we eat grass. (Russian man, Kok-Jangak).

The availability of income earnings in these towns varies. As our research shows, the transit towns, like Tash-Komur and Kadji-Sai (also benefiting from its location near the Issyk-Kul Lake) located along the major country's routes, have more opportunities to engage in trade as opposed to such remote towns like Ak-Tyuz, Kok-Jangak and Mailu-Suu, based in the dead-end locations. Absence of economic opportunities had direct relation to the economic well-being of residents.

Economic Well-Being

This was the most frequent references in the narratives of residents. The misery in which people of these towns live today contrasts so strongly with the wealthy life they had in the past. They were among the richest Kyrgyzstan's middle class and after the collapse they became the poorest.

Until 90-s we lived very well. We had an excellent house, furniture. My husband was working in the mine and we had 25,000 rubbles in the bank account. This was equivalent of three cars. We lived a very happy life with my children. Today, in Kadji-Sai people live differently. The society is divided into two-three classes: wealthy (those who work in Russia or in Kumtor), middle class (those who have small shops), but the majority 70-80% live in extreme poverty and even eat mixed fodder for animal stock. My pension is 1800 som and meat costs 180 som per kilo. 1200 som is enough to go to the shop one time and buy food for a week. If I eat only noodles and grains, it will be enough for a month.

My memories of the Soviet childhood are wonderful. We had everything that people could not even have in Bishkek. Then life became difficult. Pension was not given for months. People were digging ground for metal. School didn't have heating. Classes were short and our fingers used to swallow from cold. (Tatar lady, Ak-Tyuz).

We are all hopeless people here. Don't believe things they show about us on TV. It is all lies. There is nothing good here: not for elderly, nor for youth.

As the residents struggle to survive the matter of food is very important for them. Malnutrition is strongly present. Food became a temporal cultural category to evaluate one's conditions.

My salary was 850 rubbles and daily rations for food in the cafeteria – 86 kopeek each. We never bought meat by kilos, we used to buy one whole carcass of sheep for 200 rubbles. For winter we would get three of them and jerk. Sausage smelled so nice, the one sold now is not a sausage. ((Kyrgyz man, Ak-Tyuz).

We are just surviving. I missed sausages, I haven't had them for a very long time. (Kyrgyz man, Ak-Tyuz).

Kadamjai was a city on the Moscow's provision. We had wonderful two-storey shop Aichurek. Food products were sold in the first floor. There were six kinds of fish only and it was cheap. Now we live near the lake, but we don't eat any fish, it is too expensive. Nowadays, everything is expensive. (Russian woman, Kadji-Sai).

Because main residents of the city are the elderly pensioners, references to pensions are very frequent. Another tragedy and another irony of situation in these towns is that pensions are very small and insufficient for proper retired life, families who have pensioners are among the ones who are better off – they have at least some kind of stable regular income.

Our pensioners gave their lives to the mine. They worked for more than 40 years. But today they don't get any attention. There is no even a hospital. If somebody has a stroke – nobody can help them. Recently, one girl, a year and two months old, died on the way to the hospital in the regional center, which is far away. (Kyrgyz woman, Ak-Tyuz).

When I received my first pension after the introduction of national currency, I cried: it was 160 som – enough to buy four liters on vegetable oil. (Tatar woman, Tash-Komur).

Pensioners live better than others. At least they get pension regularly. The worst situation is for us – those who are in the pre-pension age. I still have two years before I can get it and I can't wait. (Russian man, kok-Jangak).

Poverty in many cases becomes political. People rarely talk about their misery without putting a blame: on those who broke the Soviet Union, on present governments, on circumstances and interestingly, on the rich.

The help that comes is stolen by the rich. We don't see any of it. They have a good life, while we are suffering. I had gangrene of my foot because of working in the mine and I am disabled now. I sweep the street for 650 som. Yes, I drink. I have enough to buy some food

and tea, but not enough to buy clothes. Here is my shoe with a big hole in it. I cannot buy a new pair. (Uzbek man, Kok-Jangak).

We lived very well. Gasoline was 5 kopeek. Everything was destroyed by this scum Gorbachev and another scum Eltcin. (Uzbek man, Kok-Jangak).

Children are hungry every day. They don't go to school – instead they search for metal around the town. For example, my son – he will find couple of kilos – sell them for 2 soms and buy a candy to suck on. In 5 years he already knows how to earn money.

Perhaps, the most frequently mentioned fact was that many of these towns were on the provision from Moscow. It was clearly a powerful marker of these people's special status within the country – the matter of strong pride and the biggest nostalgia.

In the Soviet times Kok-Jangak was subsidized from Moscow. Goods, which were not available in the other towns, were available here, so much so that people from other places came here to buy them. Goods were also cheaper. For example, lamb meat here was 1.50 rubles, while in the market it was 3 rubles.

Changes in the economic well-being of people was both related to and affecting the social life of these towns. This is described in the next section.

Social Life

Active social life of these towns in the Soviet times contrasts strongly with the present sense of isolation and detachment. This loss of socialization crosses several domains of people's lives: their work, community of friends, relatives and newly realized remoteness of the location.

My life was interesting when I worked in school I attended all school pioneer and komsomol meetings. There was no single council I was not a member of. I was living in a people whirlpool. During Soviet times, we had post-boxes with keys. Now we don't have boxes and postman doesn't want to go up the fourth floor to bring me letters. So, I don't receive any. I don't have a phone line and I don't have a mobile phone because I don't know how to use it. So, I am totally disconnected from my relatives and I live alone here. (Russian woman, Kadji-Sai).

Ethnicity was perceived positively in the Soviet towns. They were very multi-cultural and as following accounts show, different ethnic groups lived peacefully with each other. Presently, the ethnic diversity significantly shrunk and there was at least one reference to an ethnic conflict in Kok-Jangak which involved Kurdish Turks living there.

We lived well and happily: 3,500 workers – 37 ethnic groups. We, Kyrgyz didn't know Kyrgyz language. Everybody was speaking in Russian. (Kyrgyz woman, Ak-Tyuz).

In Soviet times we had a tradition of ethnic celebrations. Every other month one ethnic group would organize its holiday, prepare food and organize performances. All other residents would come to eat and watch. We lived very peacefully among each other. We didn't have any conflicts. If there were fights during dancing nights in the park, they had nothing to do with ethnicity. The mine was uniting everybody. (Uzbek man, Kok-Jangak).

Frequent references were made by the residents to the active public life and all kinds of celebrations they used to have in the Soviet times.

We also celebrated the Miner's day. The whole city was getting together in the Club. There was a concert and awards and presents to miners, then everybody would go celebrating. There was music and dances in the park and then groups would go to picnics in the nearby mountains. Everybody would enjoy, rest and next day all would be back to work. (Uzbek man, Kok-Jangak).

We had a skate-ring and residents used to play hockey there. On the New Year celebrations there was a Christmas tree there, all decorated and lit. Another one was at the entry to the town. It was so beautiful at night. Our club was the best in the region. It could host 360 people and all kinds of conferences were taking place there. It was burnt in a fire. When democracy started, the destruction started. People started leaving and disassembling their houses. Everybody left – to Russia, to Kazakhstan. Only elderly stayed – who have no place to go. We seat and remember our mine, our life and then we grieve about present, which has nothing, only destruction. All we have left from our town is ruins. (Kyrgyz man, Ak-Tyuz).

References to schools were also important both in relation to the number of students and quality of teaching.

The school used to have three streams of students a day. Today we have only 120 kids in it. We used to go to the pioneer camps in the summer. We had our own in Issyk-Kul. (Kyrgyz man, Ak-Tyuz).

We had excellent school teachers. Now youth is different. They just want to take, steal, grab. In the past people were different. (Kyrgyz woman, Ak-Tyuz).

Almost all people who of slightly elderly generation who saw both Soviet and present times have gone through a painful experience of seeing the town grow and flourish and then seeing how it was demolished and emptied. People, who were their friends, colleagues or just acquaintances, were leaving massively and they were remaining behind. Their social networks were destroyed, their work places disappeared, places where they used to socialize, such as parks, clubs and cafes, stopped functioning. They lived through this very negative and sad collapse of their world and some of them found an escape from this sad reality in drinking. Drinking is a problem, both according to the survey and our observations. Drunken young people fighting in the street and drunken elderly people are a common picture. Interaction between the two is not very nice either. We have seen how in some towns the youth don't have much respect for the elderly: they yell and swear at them. In one case we witnessed a real fight between two elderly women. In another we saw how one young man called one elderly man a fascist; then the elderly man hit him with his walking stick so hard that the stick was bent. The young in response took a large stone and threw it into the elderly man's back. The elderly called a police. Police came, took both to the station and they both came back some 20 minutes later and sat with us like if nothing happened.

These contrasts are evidences of big voids in the present economic and social lives of the residents in these towns. The image of before is often idealized, but the fact that it is so strongly present in

their stories suggests that it is still an important meaning-making landmark used as a reference to the present. This paper shows the importance of the context in the endurance of such references: people from all parts of the country went through the similar crises of meaning and identity, but it is these towns because of their remoteness and geographic and social disconnection from other places of the country experienced less outside influences and their crisis has never ended. They are the most vivid manifestations of discontinuities and emptiness.

Conclusion

Joma Nazypary (2002) in his book *Post-Soviet Chaos* describes the concept of *bardak* as “extreme legal and moral disorder in social life” (p.2) with “stronger implications, meaning total disorder [with] direct immoral connotations” (p.3). This paper’s description of the Soviet collapse in the periphery of the Soviet Union is similar to his informants’ perception of the post-Soviet change as “a natural disaster or an epidemic” (p.49). Nazypary describes the emotional outcome of such disaster as a feeling of loss on several levels: loss of property, work, self-esteem, leisure, security, and egalitarian society. The character in his book describes her experience in following tragic way: “In the Soviet time we had our money, our strength, our aspirations. But now we have nothing, we are corpses. We are moving corpses and this is awful and regretful.” (p.56). According the author “the future is cancelled [and] nostalgia is a replacement for this cancelled future” (p.62). The story of people in the “empty-towns” of Kyrgyzstan is very similar. Their very vivid nostalgia is often all they have left to live with in regards to the crisis of meaning and identity.

This article proposes another term, which help us better understand and make sense of the post-Soviet change – *emptiness*. Such terms as emptiness or *bardak* might not necessarily qualify for a truly representational category but they are useful concepts in the process of deconstruction and reconstruction of both local transformations embedded in the specific places and of such broader phenomena and processes as modernity and modernization. Just like Nazypary’s accounts of post-Soviet tragedies in Kazakshatan are used by the author as cases against wild global capitalism, the examples of the post-Soviet emptiness given in the images and narratives from the Kyrgyzstan’s former industrial towns presented in this paper aid in the critique of modernism. The quality of the intellectual depth and persuasion in this paper might be doubted but the tragedy of people’s lives in these towns is very real. Elderly, hungry, marginalized and hopeless in this paper all witness against the failed promises of the Soviet modernity.

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