

Technologizing complacency: Spectacle, structural violence, and “living normally” in a resource-rich state

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On December 16, 2011, Kazakhstan’s 20th Independence Day, police forces opened fire on protesting oil workers in the Caspian coastal town of Zhanaozen, killing 16 people and wounding around 100. Not many in the West noticed, but it is certain that the British musician Sting did. In July, he unexpectedly canceled a concert in Kazakhstan for Astana Day – the country’s national holiday celebrating its new capital city, which also falls on President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s birthday. Just prior to his trip, Sting was given an Amnesty International advisory, which detailed ongoing rights abuses in western Kazakhstan, where oil workers have been striking since May 2011, demanding wage increases, equal rights with foreign workers, and the lifting of independent labor union restrictions (Nigmatov, 2011). Having come under fire in 2009 for performing in Uzbekistan, whose President, Islam Karimov is generally considered one of the region’s cruelest despots, Sting was not keen to look supportive of another repressive Central Asian regime (BBC, 2011).

In many popular and academic accounts oil regions are naturalized as “epicenters of extraordinary violence and conflict” (Watts, 2010: 423; see also Kleveman, 2003; Le Billon, 2004; Watts, 2008). However, commentators who focus on violence in oil regions tend to obscure the fact that many oil-rich places are *not* marred by the tremendous violence they seek to describe or predict. Kazakhstan, the largest Soviet successor state after Russia, is one such place – or at least it was until December. The ruling regime, under the leadership of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, has been in power since the state gained independence in 1991. Nazarbayev’s apparatus has quite effectively built up an image of the regime as a guarantor of stability and of inter-ethnic and inter-religious peace in a region marred by tremendous violence and instability since the 1990s (here, looking over the border at the traumatic events that have unfolded in neighboring countries of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan in the past 20 years).

Indeed, President Nazarbayev is quite popular, largely due to the regime’s success in cultivating an image of him as the benevolent father, providing economic prosperity and rapidly improving quality of life, unparalleled elsewhere in Central Asia. The Zhanozen event was traumatic for President Nazarbayev, who was quick to reprimand local police officers and to

shake up elite power circles (RFE/RL 2011, 2012). This is not the typical response of a despot; Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov, by contrast, responded to his own police forces killing upwards of 500 people in Andijon in 2005 by blaming Western democratizers and Islamic terrorists alike for instigating the incident (Koch, 2011). Rather, Nazarbayev's response is more characteristic of someone operating under a "self-limiting governmental *ratio*" (Foucault, 2008: 16), and more specifically based on a certain developmental *raison d'État*. Nazarbayev's leadership is, in fact, best understood as a "developmental regime," i.e. a system in which the avowed role of government is to propel society on a path of "progress," "making men's happiness the state's utility, making men's happiness the very strength of the state" (Foucault, 2007: 327). This is precisely what makes the events in Kazakhstan last December so remarkable: progress-oriented regimes typically do not open fire on their citizens. Instead, the violence of developmental states tends to be more structural, more subtle, and in turn, often more totalizing.

This is especially true in *resource-rich* states whose regimes espouse a grand goal of progress, and where "success or failure, rather than legitimacy or illegitimacy" are the criteria of governmental action (Foucault, 2008: 16). Still escaping the bonds of deeply-entrenched Soviet legacies, Kazakhstan increasingly has much in common with the Persian Gulf states, such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar – notably, none of which felt more than the slightest tremor during the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011. A key reason that these states have not seen the kind of resource violence witnessed in, for example, the resource-rich states of Africa, lies in their very *success* in providing a modicum of progress and comfort for their citizenries – *and* in the perception that this is sufficient to justify their complacency about major economic inequalities. Neither condition is sufficient alone, and here development projects are of central importance. In Kazakhstan, like the Gulf states, state authority has been achieved through a close relationship with the exploitation of natural resources, the rents of which are invested in various "dazzling development projects" (Coronil, 1997: 5).

Like the spectacular urban development schemes in Doha, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai, Astana has become the Nazarbayev regime's favorite site for performing the role of "magnanimous sorcerer" (Coronil, 1997: 5), with an endless parade of international conferences, national celebrations and concerts, sporting events, and sensational new architecture. Synecdochic by nature, these urban-based projects are frequently framed as being representative of developments in the rest of the country, or as "trickling down" to the hinterlands or to non-elites. But

synecdoche, like any good metaphor, masks as much as it unmasks (West, 2003: 115) – for development projects systematically divert attention from the unequal power relations that make them possible. By presenting themselves “as the state,” ruling elites in the Nazarbayev regime have used their status as “legitimate” arbitrators and extractors of Kazakhstan’s natural resources to achieve extraordinary wealth (Junisbai, 2010), while oil workers and other rural residents live in widespread poverty. But the issue is not so one-sided as the elites exploiting the poor. Instead, as in other developmental states, a non-elite majority is also implicated in reproducing the system’s unique economy of power. Most Kazakhstani, and especially urbanites who make up at least 60 percent of the population, have experienced dramatic improvements in their quality of life over the past 10 years – just as have their Emirati or Qatari counterparts. For them, the woes of the rural poor, such as the oil workers, are difficult to imagine.

To illustrate this argument, let us return to Sting’s concert cancellation in July 2011, which stirred a number of telling conversations among Astana’s residents. In my interviews with young, middle-class Kazakh informants, they were uniformly irritated that Sting should cancel. This was on two accounts. First, they were outraged that he should liken Kazakhstan’s political situation to that of Uzbekistan. Articulating a nationalist narrative of insulted pride for being compared to their perceived “backward” neighbor, one informant exclaimed: “It’s as if he thinks we are just another ‘stan’!” Second, Astana’s residents also systematically trivialized the complaints of the oil workers, arguing that they are the last ones who should be complaining about their pay (for it is widely assumed that oil company workers have extremely well-paying jobs). Overall, the sentiment in the capital was one of anger – not at the injustice exercised toward fellow citizens, but that Sting should cancel his concert over such a “trivial” issue and for people so unworthy as *oil* workers, when they had paid good money for their concert tickets. These urbanites’ demonization of the protesters points to the effectiveness with which the regime has been able to win over their support through its “positive” and spectacle-based state- and nation-building project.

But even for those who are not actively “won over” by the “dazzling development projects,” their relative prosperity (both as compared to their southern neighbors and to their Soviet past) is itself grounds for political apathy. Popular attitudes in Central Asia are characterized by what Anna Matveeva (2009: 1107) has termed, “a certain hierarchy of regional disasters, making people think that ‘here it is still not as bad as elsewhere.’” Among

Kazakhstanis, this has more or less ossified into a “don’t rock the boat” ethos since the early 2000s. Commenting on Kazakhstan’s lack of democracy, an informant in Astana told me in July 2011, “I don’t care what they do there [gesturing to the administrative center], because I have a good job and I can live normally (*normal’no*).” This is a pervasive sentiment among most ordinary citizens, who overwhelmingly fail to see themselves – that is, their work, their leisure and consumption, and their overall prosperity in the new political economic order of the independent state – to be connected with the processes of resource extraction and power relations in the state’s “hinterlands” (this of course being a common phenomenon, classically explored by Raymond Williams (1973) in *The Country and the City*). The fact is, however, that natural resource exploitation, and its accompanying power inequalities, are the very condition of possibility for them to “live normally.”

Although they may appear to be exceptional, resource-rich regimes, such as Kazakhstan, have broader implications for the sorts of questions we should be asking about technologies of government elsewhere in the world. Most pointedly, they challenge liberal understandings of agency as subversive action (Nealon, 2008): regardless of whether citizens of “illiberal” regimes “agree” with the state-initiated development projects, they invariably work opportunistically within, and thus constitute, the resultant networks of political and economic relations. In their daily behaviors – ranging from driving to working to spectating – they participate in a political economy made possible by natural resource exploitation. Of course, the elite-defined bureaucratic structures and political economy can never be total – there is inherently space for overflow, exemplified by the actions of both protesters and police forces in Zhanaozen. But just as in “liberal” regimes, state power is not something “external” to these people; it is something that they are instrumental in constituting, through their political and economic behaviors, which more often than not looks like the pursuit of a “normal” life and a desire not to “rock the boat.” So as researchers, it is important that we attend to the fact that complacency and indifference are in fact *agencies*, which are strategically colonized and technologized by certain regimes. And the argument might be made that this is equally (if differently) so in resource-rich developmental states as in liberal democracies.

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