

Rethinking agricultural cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan

Towards a postcapitalist approach to cooperation in postsocialism

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Community-based approaches have gained acclamation worldwide as a way to promote inclusive development and, in ex-socialist countries, as a way to support the “transition” towards a market economy. International donors have attempted to establish formal institutions for cooperation; among these, service cooperatives have promised a democratic, market-fit alternative to socialist collective farms. Kyrgyzstan’s liberalised economy after its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 has been a fertile ground for experiments with models of institutionalised cooperation – including cooperatives. However, today the dominant framing considers most cooperatives in the country as failed and explains this apparent failure through forms of historically inherited negative attitude towards cooperation.

This research aims to provide an alternative reading of agricultural cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan in order to generate more positive affects than the feeling of failure produced by the dominant framing. I focus on how local communities reinterpret and renegotiate a formal institution for cooperation promoted by external actors. I illustrate how international actors uphold a specific model of cooperatives and how local actors incorporate, and thereby reframe, this model in their everyday. I do this through an ethnographic engagement with the practices and representations that emerge in relation to a local cooperative in a Kyrgyzstani village.

My analysis represents an entry point for rethinking not only cooperatives but also well-established economic theories and models – in Kyrgyzstan as well as globally. The analysis opens a broader reflection on how communities locally rearticulate global processes of neoliberalisation and marketisation. I thus interrogate the ways in which hegemonic discourses on the economy, development and modernity produce particular kinds of subjectivities and their consequences on material inequalities. Simultaneously, I explore the room for resistance and contestation that emerges from the discontinuities of these hegemonic discourses. As a way to reinforce and expand this agency, I propose an approach to cooperatives and cooperation in postsocialism – a postcapitalist, postfantasmatic and relational approach – that invites to assume an open, anti-essentialist stance to engage with communities in the here and now.

Jury:

Prof. Dr. Christine Bichsel, University of Fribourg, Switzerland (thesis supervisor)
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