

Topic: Contemporary cultural production in Uzbekistan

Location: Tashkent, Uzbekistan

The purpose of this trip was to tie up the loose ends of the research for my book manuscript and to make sure all my information was as up-to-date as possible. The thesis of my book is that a distinguishing feature of global cultural modernization is the adoption of common cultural forms for the expression of heterogeneous national identities. I argue that paying attention to cultural objects on the level of form helps us better understand the globalization of culture. By producing cultural objects that predominantly express “traditional” culture and identities on the level of content, while expressing “modern” culture and identities on the level of form, cultural elites are able to project an image of their culture that is both uniquely national and generically universal. This argument addresses issues of cultural imperialism by exploring the process of cultural modernization that links the spread of Western cultural forms such as ballet, theatre, and symphony music to a hegemonic discourse about civilization and progress. I am also speaking to the literature in institutional sociology and international relations that stresses the importance of global norms at the level of the nation-state.

By analytically separating form from content, this study demonstrates how both processes can take place simultaneously as global cultural forms are strategically employed by Uzbekistan's cultural elites for the propagation of their national culture. The focus of this book is on the mentality, working conditions, and intentions of cultural producers who are responsible for the representation and production of national identity through performative cultural forms such as European-style theatre, Olympic-style spectacle, and folklore competitions. In exploring the origins of these performative forms, the ways they were introduced into Uzbekistan during the twentieth century, and the reasons Uzbekistan's cultural elites continue to use them today as tools in their nation building project, this book will make a significant theoretical and empirical contribution both to the scholarship on Central Asia and to studies of the globalization of culture.

During my month in Uzbekistan, I conducted 11 interviews with theater directors, critics, performers and administrators, and attended 11 cultural events, mainly theatrical performances at theaters such as the National Academic Theater (formerly the Hamza), the Ilkhom, the Alisher Navoi State Opera and Ballet Theater, and the Russian Youth Theater. The interviewees were

recruited using a snowball sampling method. I asked three basic questions in the interview and encouraged the interviewees to expand on their answers. The questions were: how has your work changed since independence? For whom do you do your creative work/what are your artistic and non-artistic goals? And how do you balance tradition and modernity in your work? Unfortunately, my original plan to go to the Ferghana Valley was interrupted and my interview schedule disrupted by nearly a week of illness during which I couldn't conduct interviews, though I did continue to attend theatrical performances and collect research materials when I was able.

This research made a valuable contribution to the book I am writing in several ways. First, over the last several years of conducting research on cultural elites in Uzbekistan, I have been able to observe the very gradual changes that have taken place in Uzbekistan's cultural institutions and in the discourse about culture in the public sphere. In the four years since my last visit to Uzbekistan, there has been a gradual liberalization in terms of what topics are allowable for artistic exploration and in terms of what is considered possible on an institutional level. Two brief examples: a wider range of historical topics is now open for discussion in the public sphere, including the

repressions of the Stalin era and their impact on ordinary people; and in terms of institutions, there is a greater openness on the part of directors of certain theaters, especially those that are more marginal, to finding alternate means of funding and new ways of doing their work. The core institutions and the Ministry of Culture, however, remain steadfast in their Soviet approach.

Second, I found support for my ideas about the importance of modern cultural forms as a means of communicating particular identities. All but one of the theater directors I interviewed expressed a desire that their work be interesting and understandable to their peers in other countries. What was interesting and slightly unexpected was that these interviewees, unlike some of my previous interviewees, stressed that the identities they were expressing were themselves very modern and hybrid. They expressed a pride in the unique mixture of cultures that is present in Tashkent and claimed that it was important to them that the flavor of Tashkent, not of Uzbek culture and traditions, come across in their work.

Third, I talked with many people, not just my interviewees, about the importance of Western cultural forms such as ballet, opera, symphony music and theater to contemporary cultural life in Uzbekistan. Almost universally,

people made a distinction between theater and the others, claiming a psychological universalism to the form of European style theater, while the others were “marked” as European elite culture (though they feel the presence of these genres indicates that Tashkent is a “civilized” city). Some of the more analytical of my interviewees pointed out the commonalities between the roots of traditional Uzbek theatrical forms and the origins of European theater in Comedia Del Arte and Greek drama. Others simply saw the need for theater as a human universal and saw no significance in the use of a European style to fulfill this need. Everyone I spoke with saw European-style theater as integral to the contemporary cultural life of any nation in the world today, not just Uzbekistan.

Finally, my research also uncovered some problems with arts administration in Tashkent and I would like to tie these issues to some policy-relevant concerns raised by my research. Tashkent’s institutions of high culture are burdened by Soviet institutional infrastructure without the benefit of Soviet subsidies. One example is the Alisher Navoi State Opera Theater, which has 60 soloists on its payroll, each receiving about \$35 a month, regardless of whether they have actually performed in recent memory. This, and situations like it in other institutions, have given talented people little incentive to continue their

work in the republic. Tashkent has a rich cultural legacy that is deteriorating at such a rate that there may be no next generation of performers due to the lack of qualified teachers and the bleak salary prospects. The government has shown an interest in capital investment in culture, in one case spending \$5 million to renovate and remodel a major theater, but they are hesitant to renovate their organizations and methods. It is my recommendation that international policy programs will pay more attention to the issue of knowledge transfer in the area of arts administration. Institutions with great cultural legacies all over the former Soviet Union would benefit from advice and training in this area. The governments alone lack the money and sometimes the will to ensure that these intangible treasures are not lost. Advice on more efficient administration as well as assistance in finding alternatives to government subsidies would benefit many of Uzbekistan's cultural institutions.