

BOOK REVIEWS

CELEBRATING BORDERLANDS IN A WIDER EUROPE

Review of Makarychev, Andrey, and Alexandra Yatsyk. (2016). *Celebrating Borderlands in a Wider Europe: Nations and Identities in Ukraine, Georgia and Estonia*. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft.

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Much of the academic and political debate on the ‘post-Soviet’ space since the early 1990s has nurtured a dominant perspective on the countries that found themselves in between larger power nodes, with their respective hegemonic claims, as arenas of great power political contestation. In a way, it immensely contributed to *objectifying* the lands trapped between multi-layered borders – legal, cultural, normative and so alike. Inevitably, the thinking on post-Sovietness got prompted into the widespread belief that ‘the ‘post-Soviet’ remains an empty space, a non-existence, devoid of its subjectifying force, its own signifier, and its own meaning effect’, as put by Serguei Oushakine back in 2000. (Oushakine 2000, p.1010) As such, these allegedly aphasic spaces would be doomed to be stuck in endless contestation between the powers from without. Countering such a mainstream – and common especially in geopolitical theory – strand of thinking, Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk in their new book on celebrating borderlands make a case for *subjectifying* the latter ones, thus praising borderlands’ own agency. Focusing on the various actors in Ukraine, Georgia and Estonia, a representative part of the wider borderland space, – from local governments to central ones, from national non-governmental organisations to international ones, from local communities to nations – as well as their techniques of self-

subjectifying, signifying and meaning-making, the authors praise borderland subjectivity and agency. *'Celebrating Borderlands...'* is what conceptually can answer the question of what *will* come after, and *should* come instead of, the decreasing in its explanatory value 'post-Soviet(ness)' frame in East European and Russian studies.

In their quest for borderlands' self-subjectifying force and patterns of agential behaviour, Makarychev and Yatsyk proceed from answering a triple research question: what borderlands are, how they define their national identities, and what strategies they pursue in the context of binary logic of contestation that structures their agential space (p.13)? Borderland identities form a centerpiece of the authors' research strategy to explore and explain both the reviving binary logic of EU-Russia conflictual interaction in the space concerned (projections *of* external 'Selves'), as well as borderlands' own politically consequential self-subjectifying interaction with the EU and Russia (projections *onto* external 'Selves'). The topical ideas of 'Russian incompleteness' and 'many Europes' are thus the ones that get particularly addressed in the book within the latter perspective. Informed this way, the study followed a twofold research approach that synergized *'post-politics'* and *'governmentality'* theories. The authors' main claim is that 'the logic of borderland authorities is often grounded in post-political thinking' (p.41), thus prompting them prioritize popular welfare, consensual governance and development policies of sorts rather than power projection and rivalry, that nonetheless can be effectuated as a side-effect of the former efforts. Side-effectual have subsequently to be deemed also external influences, for the authors hold that the very notion of borderlands' subjectivity negates the viability of external governance (dominance) and celebrates the virtue of governmentality (enabling and empowering practices). The Foucauldian – depoliticized – 'governmentality' concept thus consistently frames the book's main line of argumentation. Rather than portraying borderlands as spaces of contesting 'extended governance' exercised either by Russia or the European Union, the book conceptualizes the borderlands in a wider Europe as actors that pursue a 'rational self-conduct' (p.46) even when embraced in external institutional settings and normative practices. The lenses of 'governmentality' theory hence allow for escaping the dominant discourse of a strategically imposed-from-above power that saturates the

agential space of the borderlands concerned, and conceptualize tactical ‘governance at a distance’ that is mostly about ‘helping others to constitute subjectivities and abilities to act independently and optimize resources’ (p.46).

Such an approach represents an astonishingly stringent and carefully tailored contemporary reading of Michel Foucault’s late-1980s conception of power in his idea of governmentality – the latter entailing essentially ‘the contract between the technologies of domination of Others and those of the Self’ (Foucault 1988, p.19). Seeing the notion of ‘borderland’ much deeper than as a geographical construct (that is borderland as a cultural, economic, normative, symbolic and performative phenomenon), Makarychev and Yatsyk are keen on identifying in their study specific mechanisms, or governmentality techniques, that shape borderland meaning-making and identity-building thus eventually co-producing autonomous borderland subjectivities. These basically include, according to the book, ‘good governance’, ‘festivisation’, ‘disneyisation’, and other urban ‘performative events’ that transcend the boundaries of the local and are effectively translated onto the national level. The authors trace these practices of self-‘enabling’ and self-‘empowerment’ that come to force out the patterns of external ‘dominance’ in three comparative country/case studies: Ukrainian Galician political culture and Western Ukrainian festivals of sorts, including the European Football Championship (EURO 2012); international sporting events in Georgia, particularly the European 2015 Olympic Youth Festival and the final of the UEFA Super Cup; and Estonian national song and dance festivals as key components of its spiritual tradition of nurturing national identity. It should be pointed out however that the book’s narrative goes beyond those three case studies and deals with broader issues of internal-external interaction policies and discourses. Structured in four chapters that contextualize the theme (chapter one on borderlands and their meanings and techniques) and substantiate the argument in three comparative case studies (chapter two on Ukraine’s West as ‘another Europe’; chapter three on Estonian song festivals; and chapter four on Georgian sport performative events), the book’s concluding part dares to ask a rhetorical question that is highly politicized in public and political discourses ‘in a wider Europe’. In posing the question whether ‘the story of Europe [can] be told from its

Eastern borderlands?’ (p.125), the authors reverse traditional core-periphery understanding of international interactions in the region concerned, and subtly but boldly advance a promising thinking on celebrating agency beyond hegemonic contestation of different sorts. Ironically, while focusing on celebration as meaning-making performative events *in* Europe’s borderlands they make a well-argued and more than timely case for celebration as scholarly praising *of* borderlands in a wider Europe, but also in other geographically distant but no less contested and allegedly aphasic agential spaces.

References

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