Post-Liberal Statebuilding in Central Asia

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From Imaginary to Practice: Capturing the Multiple Meanings of Peace, Security and Order

This chapter continues the line of thought from Chapter 2 as it elaborates the epistemological and conceptual grounding for the post-liberal approach and decolonial angle of this monograph. To that end, the first point to be elaborated is that the literature that views the ‘liberal peace’ (and even its critics) in a critical light, and similarly, authors demanding alternatives to prevalent ‘illiberal’ and ‘authoritarian’ critiques of non-Western forms of political ordering, emphasizes the multiplicity of worldviews and knowledge that remain unappreciated in a largely Euro- and Western-centric scholarship. At the same time, these critiques rarely explore the marginal worldviews and knowledge to a great extent, either, but focus mainly on demonstrating how the respective actors contest (Sabaratnam, 2017) or completely reject (Exo, 2017) liberal peace interventions in specific political, economic or wider societal questions. Other studies, such as those by Shilliam (2015) and Povinelli (2016), present a more in-depth engagement with indigenous lifeworlds and struggles, but have not been received or discussed in peace, conflict and intervention studies. My aim in this chapter is to further apprehend the ‘problem’ posed by disparate and unacknowledged worldviews, knowledge or, one may say, ontologies, with the help of the Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia. Situated in the study of meaning and translation within and across cultures, heteroglossia posits the association of several meanings to one and the same signifier and thus, as I argue, offers an entry point into the deconstruction and tracing of the roles that meanings and interpretations take on in internationalized social ordering processes.

The second conceptual step of the chapter is to develop a way to capture the heteroglossia characterizing the state- and peacebuilding processes observed. Drawing on psychoanalytical and cultural studies works of
Cornelius Castoriadis, Charles Taylor and others, I introduce the concept of ‘social imaginary’ as a means to analyse meanings and understandings that are not explicitly observable in empirical reality. This is an important advancement from existing research, which focuses on discourses and practices while the wider implications of actors’ positioning in ideological frameworks and understandings of being have remained underexplored. Thus, contestations about the kind of political system to be built in a given place, the role of historical legacies of colonialism and dependency or the relations between humans and nature deemed desirable by a given actor only feature in analyses to the degree that they are identifiable in actors’ rhetorical, symbolical or otherwise positioning. By conceptualizing the social imaginary, this research seeks to widen the horizon of peace and security analysis into a perspective on how particular projects and practices are situated in wider understandings of society and human existence, which may stand in contradiction to the neoliberal episteme on which both social science and contemporary statebuilding interventions are based. In doing so, the chapter draws on the burgeoning literature on social imaginaries and their use in social research (see Adams et al, 2015; Adams and Smith, 2019) and hints at the alternative worldviews that emerge from this analysis and are further discussed in Chapter 4.

In a final step, I present the dialogical land practice-based approach through which I undertook this research. This discussion highlights the emphasis that I put on following and tracing the practices of various peacebuilding and community security actors, to then analyse how particular discourses and imaginaries of social order were invoked and reproduced in and through these. Beyond these conceptual concerns, I also reflect on the situated nature of my fieldwork and overall knowledge-production process, with a particular emphasis on the safety concerns involved in researching topics such as security and peace and aspects of interethnic relations and violent extremism that have become entangled with them. I demonstrate how the long-term cooperation and dialogue with my partners was the best way to understand and appropriately deal with these issues, while further research is needed to unpack the emerging post-liberal regime of order in Kyrgyzstan and the silences, invisibilities and violence that it inevitably produces.

Heteroglossia: the multiplicity of meanings in social processes

As Alexey Yurchak indicated in his study of the multiple understandings and philosophies of life in the late Soviet Union (Yurchak, 2006, p 133), Mikhail Bakhtin’s heteroglossia presents a possible entry point for trying to capture worldviews and knowledges that remain unseen and unacknowledged by mainstream and Western-centric social science, but which may still be
important in capturing processes of social ordering. As Bakhtin sets out in his essays published as *The Dialogical Imagination* (1981), in complex social environments, one and the same semantic unit may have multiple meanings depending on the speaker, the audience and their respective intentions and agendas. In such a world, any utterance made serves to ‘appropriate the words of others and populate them with one’s own intention’ (Bakhtin, 1981, p 21). The logical consequence is that, in Tate’s words, ‘[t]he subject is surrounded by a myriad of responses, each of which must be framed in a specific discourse chosen from this available multiplicity’ (Tate, 2007, p 9).

Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia is, in this sense, highly relevant to processes occurring in intercultural and international contexts, as it is centred on the presence of multiple registers of meaning and values on which actors may draw in constructing their own discourse (Bakhtin, 1981, pp 7, 67). This leads to an extension of the somewhat two-dimensional conceptual apparatus used in much of IR and peace and conflict studies literature which, akin to the work of Homi Bhabha (1994), focuses on processes of reception, cooperation and resulting forms of ‘mimicry’ on the one hand, and of resistance and contestation, on the other. Complicating such binary scenarios, Bakhtin offers the important consideration that discourse is a hybrid and layered phenomenon in which the social, cultural, historical and otherwise context is sedimenting. In Bakhtin’s words:

Directed toward its object, a word enters a dialogically agitated and tense environment of alien words, evaluations and accents, is woven into their complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others … and all this may in an essential manner shape the word, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile. The living utterance … cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (Bakhtin, 1981, pp 267–8)

Bakhtin, similar to key works in discourse theory (see Fairclough, 1992), insists that utterances and discourses are a product of their context and will therefore reflect shifts in the configurations of this context. This approach offers a fruitful way to deconstruct the multiplicity of meanings and associations of discourses and practices of peacebuilding and community security and their implications for large-scale statebuilding processes.

Yet, beyond merely appreciating the multiplicity of frames of meaning, Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia implies a pluralist ontology of the social world (Lottholz, 2017a). Thus, if we focus not only on the various discourses and ideas in the sphere of statebuilding and social ordering, but also unpack the different regimes of knowledge and lifeworlds that underpin them, we confront a more fundamental analytical challenge. This challenge lies in
grasping the very understandings, or rather standpoints of knowledge and facticity that underpin certain political or societal positions (Lottholz, 2017a). Different authors in the Central Asian, wider Eurasian and global context have observed that the assertion of cultural variation in understandings of knowledge, facticity and ‘truth’ has become applied in political discourse itself, even to the extent that acknowledging the (non-)reality of certain events and facts becomes a matter of political loyalty and national or cultural belonging (Rosaldo, 1989; Ortmann and Heathershaw, 2012; Szostek, 2017).

This leads to a conflation of subjectivity and facticity, via political viewpoints and belonging, which has wide-reaching implications for politics in what Pomerantsev calls a ‘post-truth world’ (2016). This concept implies that even if people may be aware of the complexity and contestations around the social order they live in, conforming to the official discursive portrayals and disregarding, or even denying, uncomfortable truths becomes a matter of good citizenship or even personal security.

By taking into account the different lifeworlds, regimes of knowledge and indeed ontologies, this research seeks to provide a more comprehensive account of the construction and maintenance of forms of peace and order in Kyrgyzstan. It thus proposes an approach to inquiry which embraces the complexity and contradictoriness of the socio-discursive sphere instead of taking side – whether implicitly or in a more reflexive manner – with the most reasonable version of competing truths and knowledges. In this sense, it is necessary to discard the neoliberal episteme (Richmond, 2009, p 332) – a conception of knowledge as something being clearly definable and handy for translation across contexts and into practical application, in favour of a ‘post-liberal episteme’, which, according to Pugh, ‘works with rather than challenges complex life’ (2014, p 316). This is the basis for an analysis of the processes by which certain forms of knowledge, whether narratives about past events and history or conceptions about democracy, development, or peace, become salient and inform socially grounded, dominant and potentially hegemonic forms of discourse and corresponding practices of peace- and statebuilding. The post-liberal knowledge regime foregrounded by this perspective is flagged up throughout the empirical analysis and exhibited most clearly in Chapter 7, where I show how civil society actors develop sound conceptions and generate objective evidence in favour of people-centred law enforcement reform in line with the above-mentioned Co-Security, which are in various ways ignored and overruled by the authorities in their effort to maintain state security and control.

In this sense, and referring back to the main theme, I understand a post-liberal approach to researching statebuilding processes in Central Asia not only as focused on the way in which liberal politics and policy making are transcended, but also as an epistemological commitment to expose the multiplicity and dialogicality of knowledge in Kyrgyzstan, which does
not lend itself to an inquiry from a liberal Enlightenment episteme with its unified conception of knowledge. More than conceptualizing the shift from liberal to post-liberal forms of social ordering, political debates and depoliticization, this approach rejects the neoliberal scientific episteme and seeks to grasp the contestations of various forms of knowledge in the analysis of internationalized processes of state- and peacebuilding. As Chapter 4 shows in more detail, the key divergences from neoliberal and analogous modernistic understandings of society and state–society relations lie in people’s understanding of the role of the spiritual domain and human–nature relations. Tracing these in the discussion of the ‘tradition and culture’ as well as ‘politics of sovereignty’ imaginaries, I show how these ways of being in the world foreground a critical stance toward or even rejection of some aspects of economic and state institutional development, which can also imply complications in peace and security practices. In this sense, my research adds to decolonial perspectives in peace, conflict and intervention studies, as it demonstrates how alternative understandings of society and human existence play a role and need to be appreciated in terms of their influence on social ordering processes, even if they complicate the more pragmatic and solution-oriented perspectives in community security and peacebuilding.

**Conceptualizing the role of social imaginaries in social ordering**

Having discussed the necessity to engage more directly with the subjectivities and lifeworlds involved in the social ordering process through *heteroglossia* as a way to appreciate the coexistence of multiple perspectives and worldviews, this section turns to the question how this can be conceptually realized through the concept of ‘social imaginary’. Publications using or only invoking the latter abound and make it somewhat a buzzword in social science research. Numerous articles, a new journal and book series attest to the concept’s relevance for inquiring ‘complexes of cultural meaning and cultural projects of power’ as well as their (re-)shaping in encounters with other cultures and civilizations (Social Imaginaries Editorial Collective, 2015, p 7; Adams and Smith, 2019). The concept stems, at first sight, from the psychoanalytic theory of Freud and Lacan, who coined the triad of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real (Lacan, 1977). Yet, the key aspect of the ‘imaginary’ is that it links the realm of cognition and ideas with processes taking place in the ‘real’ world – a link that has been explored in scholarship ranging from Durkheim and Marx to Benedict Anderson (Adams et al, 2015, p 19). In this sense, it helps to bridge and mediate between the structural and materialist determinisms of realist and Marxist social theory and the primacy of ideas postulated by constructivists.
The scholar associated with the first introduction of the imaginary is Cornelius Castoriadis. His *Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987), originally published in French in 1975, has become a reference point for most applications and advancements of the concept. Following James’ discussion (2019, p 34), Castoriadis’ conception can be divided into the two aspects of, first, how humans come to know themselves in relation to others, and second, the imaginary as a ‘constitutive basis of everything social’, in other words a kind of matrix by which an understanding of society and humanity is created to begin with. The second, more fundamental aspect is foregrounded in Castoriadis’ conception of the imaginary as a mirror image:

Those who speak of the ‘imaginary,’ understanding by this the ‘specular,’ the reflection of the ‘fictive,’ do no more than repeat, usually without realizing it, the affirmation which has for all time chained them to the underground of the famous cave: it is necessary that this world be an image of something. (Castoriadis, 1987, p 3)

This all-encompassing and, in fact, totalizing understanding of the social imaginary as constituting ‘each historical period, its singular manner of living, of seeing and of conducting its own existence, its world’ (Castoriadis, 1987, p 145) offers an entry point to fundamentally rethink – and potentially reshape – social existence. However, it also runs the danger, as argued by James, of becoming ‘everything and nothing’ and not yielding analytical added value (2019, p 40).

More productive is the conceptualization of social imaginaries in the plural, as competing understandings of social order, which refers back to the first aspect of the imaginary as a vehicle for humans to come to know themselves in relation to others and within the social whole. As emphasized by various authors (James, 2019; Adams et al, 2015), the imaginary processes considered in this respect concern primarily dimensions and outcomes on a collective, macro-social level while being less interested in imagination as an individual capacity. Considering social imaginaries as shaped and reproduced by processes of socialization and negotiation in public and private spheres helps to explain stability and normality in the sense that people come to imagine certain behaviours, ways of life and political or historical processes as occurring in accordance with a set of inherent and universal rules. In this sense, the idea of the imaginary extends both Bourdieu’s practice theory – in which he argues that practices as well as everyday life follow a natural order that ‘goes without saying’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p 175, original emphasis) – and, in a more implicit manner, Foucault’s observations on how the conduct of life may be regulated and governed (Foucault, 2008). Castoriadis draws this link between the imaginary and practical, material world himself as he
argues that the imaginary is not a mere projection or mirage, but emanates from ‘proper’, physical things and actions in the ‘real world’, which can be as diverse as ‘a machine gun, a call to arms, a pay check and high-priced essential goods, a court decision and a prison’ (Castoriadis, 1987, p 109).

The cultural studies scholar Charles Taylor has offered ample insights into this relation between social reality and the status quo on the one hand and between several contradicting and competing social imaginaries, on the other. In his opinion, the social imaginary provides ‘the ways we are able to think or imagine the whole of society’ (Taylor, 2007b, p 156) and it thus ‘incorporates a sense of the normal expectations that we have of one another, the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life’ (Taylor, 2007a, p 30). Taylor’s works also further consolidated the understanding of imaginaries being associated with material practices that serve to (re-)produce imaginaries. In his words: ‘Because human practices are the kind of thing that makes sense, certain ideas are internal to them; one cannot distinguish the two in order to ask the question Which causes which?’ (Taylor, 2004, p 33). He further indicates an entry point for the analysis of the imaginary as the ‘way ordinary people “imagine” their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, and legends’ (2004, p 23). This consolidates the idea of a nexus through which imaginaries materialize in visual artefacts, stories and, importantly in the case of Kyrgyzstan, history, or rather historiography as a technique of shaping the way in which society is imagined through representations of the past.

The idea of a nexus between imaginaries on the one hand, and associated discourses and practice on the other, also foregrounds an analysis of the use and manipulation of discourses by technologies of government that is less deterministic than the many discourse-focused studies with a Foucauldian grounding in peace, conflict and security studies alike (see Lewis, 2017). Analysing social imaginaries can put a balanced emphasis on the narratives and discourses appearing in a given context, while embedding them in wider cognitive and semantic predispositions and patterns, which can in turn enable the tracing of processes of reception and reaction that could reproduce but also reshape existing imaginaries. In contrast to discourse and narrative analyses which have become prevalent in the literature of international peace, conflict and security studies, or at least figure as a standard ‘context analysis’ tool therein, Castoriadis’ and Taylor’s works and their exegesis allow an engagement with more implicit – and therefore largely ignored – understandings of social order, culture and wider systemic and ontological positionings vis-à-vis questions of political and economic systems.

Such processes are conceptualized in the discussion of ‘circulating social imaginaries’ by the cultural studies scholars Valaskivi and Sumiala (2014). They affirm the conceptual step from conceiving of one imaginary as
a cognitive plane on which people’s understanding of societies is based (Castoriadis) to thinking about several, coexisting and possibly competing or contradicting imaginaries of what society is and should be, and theorize the manifestation and movement of imaginaries in space, time and materiality: ‘social imaginaries do not hang in the air, but are attached to material objects and representations, and that, as they travel and take different paths from one location to another’ (Valaskivi and Sumiala, 2014, p 240). An imaginary, they continue, ‘gains its power from the circulation in different materials, mediated places and spaces (including both virtual and physical places), and in the shared encounters between individuals created by circulation’ (p 240).

Under certain circumstances, the (re-)production of an imaginary might thus be a rather straightforward process, such as in the case of a ‘highly media-saturated’ society with an ‘affective economy of virtual encounters, remediation and circulation’ that have produced disparate effects such as a decades-long global hype around the music and entertainment industry or success mythologies surrounding entrepreneurs as diverse as Steve Jobs, Tony Robbins or today’s Instagram celebrities (2014, p 240). Still, scholarship also emphasizes that such circulation patterns are not necessarily linear but take multiple and hardly conceivable routes. Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen affirm this non-deterministic stance, arguing that: ‘While it is amply clear … that the effects we call imaginary may indeed serve a variety of purposes (divination, politics, ethics, and so on), it is also fundamental to bear in mind that the emergence of these effects qua underdetermined ‘technologies’ is, precisely, not purposeful’ (2009, p 26).

This statement distinguishes the idea of the imaginary from a conceptualization as a technology of government, that is utilization of discursive, material and practical items for ordering, structuring and regulating society. While Sneath and colleagues may be right that such change may not be, in itself, purposeful, it is nevertheless important to analytically consider the ways in which technological advancements are used by governments to improve their leverage, as well as by social actors to resist or evade the reach of the latter.

It can thus be concluded that imaginaries can be understood as mental constructs materializing in different ways, such as in images, stories and legends (Taylor, 2004, p 33) or different kinds of discourses and narratives circulated through certain types of media (Sneath et al, 2009; Valaskivi and Sumiala, 2014). Furthermore, an imaginary need not always be explicitly formulated, but can be implicit in, and made up by, a number of such elements. In this sense, I understand the imaginary as a prism or filter that influences people’s processing of, and relation to, images, discourses and implicit understandings of how things should be done and work their way in the world, for example in specific ‘real-world’ practices such as peace- and
statebuilding or community security. The experiences and perceptions people gather in such a specific field will, in turn, feed back into their understanding of how things work and should be done, in the process challenging, reshaping, but also confirming and reproducing the imaginaries that inform their thinking.

Thus, a cyclical understanding of the production of meaning and understanding in social and political life emerges, which I apply in my analysis of imaginaries of peace- and statebuilding in Chapters 5–7. In this sense, I see the imaginary as a higher order of discourse or, to use Laclau and Mouffe’s description of discourse, ‘nodal points’ that ‘fix meaning’ in a more significant way than the discourses relating to them (1985, p 100; Lewis, 2017, p 34). Further, discourses can in turn be seen as vehicles that drive and shape practices as proposed in van Leeuwen’s idea that – akin to Fairclough’s (1992, p 4) understanding of discourses having both a textual, practical and social dimension – discourses structure the way that practices are devised and performed (van Leeuwen, 2008, pp 6, 124). These considerations inform a three-fold model whereby particular practices and the associated technical discourses relate to, or may be part of, a wider societal imaginary, which is itself constituted by a larger number of discourses in various spheres of life (see Figure 3.1).

As indicated in the above discussion of the need to capture the heteroglossia of social ordering, that is the multiplicity of meaning underlying signifiers (Bakhtin, 1981), the analysis of social imaginaries is especially promising for capturing how particular practices and discourses of peacebuilding present hybridizations and combinations and overlaps of potential imaginaries of peacebuilding, as Chapter 4 will demonstrate. More than an analysis of competing ideas or ‘frames’ (James, 2019, p 21) of social order, this foregrounds attention to the underlying ontologies or understandings of being in the world that various imaginaries are embedded in. As indicated in my discussion of the imaginary of ‘tradition and culture’ in Chapter 4, such alternative ontologies can be embedded in, first, an ecosophic worldview (Botokanova, 2015) that is centred on the unity and mutual relation of humans and nature and, second, in an understanding of human existence that regards the spiritual domain to have an active role in life (see Borbieva, 2013). Despite their significance and potential bearings on processes of peacebuilding and ordering, such worldviews have often been dismissed in Western and Western-centric scholarship, which is mostly interested in forms of knowledge and experience that can be grasped through the neoliberal, modern episteme. That said, the alternative worldviews and ontologies identified in the ‘tradition and culture’ imaginary were not present in most of the peacebuilding and security practices analysed in the later chapters. But this should not lead to the conclusion that they are irrelevant in this practico-discursive domain. Rather, as I argue, ecosophic and spiritualist ways
of being in the world can be seen as a normative plain that helps to critically reflect on how present-day forms of peace and order are embedded in wider historical legacies of displacement, disconnection and amnesia wrought by colonial domination and transformation of modern nation-statehood. In his later work, Castoriadis (1997) himself developed a more nuanced stance in this regard as he rethought his position toward human rationality and Enlightenment, admitting a ‘degree of continuity between humanity and other species’ and humanity’s ‘constant worldly engagement with nature’ (Adams et al, 2015, p 37). While further details and implications of such diverging ontological approaches are discussed in the next chapter, the following section demonstrates how my approach to research was geared at following, understanding and interpreting the relation between imaginaries, discourses and practices in a mutually engaged and dialogical way.

**A cooperative and practice-based approach to research**

As a final step in setting the conceptual grounding of this monograph, I present the cooperative and dialogical approach to fieldwork taken in this research. It may be argued that imaginaries and discourses can also be analysed through more standard methodologies, as shown in Yurchak’s (2006) and other analyses of the imaginary West (see Pilkington et al, 2002), as well as Gullette and Heathershaw’s work on ‘affective politics of sovereignty’ (2015). Yet, to unpack the invocation and use of these registers in practices...
of peacebuilding and community security, the cooperative and dialogical approach I offer here has proven indispensable. As is the case in most long-term projects, this approach has evolved and been adjusted throughout time, as reflected in other more detailed discussions of the general importance of dialogical research (Lottholz and Kluczewska, 2017; Lottholz, 2018c), of its advantage in helping to avoid issues of access and personal safety of researchers and research participants (Lottholz, 2017b; Bekmurzaev et al, 2018) and of the grounding of this approach in decolonial and feminist standpoint theory (Lottholz, 2019b). Building upon these discussions and offering more detail in the chronological table of data gathered in Appendix 2, I focus my discussion here on my attempts to implement a cooperative approach in the partnership with three peacebuilding and security actors and offer reflections for further refinement of this approach in light of experiences during my research.

Contrary to initial plans, I had not started approaching relevant organizations and projects in Kyrgyzstan prior to my arrival in the country in June 2015. This increased the pressure to connect and get access in less time, but also had the advantage of building up contacts and relations through personal meetings. In talking to people from international and domestic NGOs and other platforms involved in peacebuilding, security and wider societal activities, I communicated the main objective of my research as understanding the reception and application of and resistance to globally dominant notions of democratic governance and statebuilding in Kyrgyzstan (see Bekmurzaev et al, 2018). In initiating cooperation, I presented my research project information sheet and possible questions I would ask if the respective entity agreed to participate in the research. Instead of the usual semi-structured interviews, I asked people if they were interested in cooperating for a longer period of time, during which I would accompany (Ru.: soprovozhdat) their work and analyse the projects they gave me access to. This was supposed to create a ‘win-win’ situation, in which partners would gain from my analysis and external point of view, while I could get more in-depth and long-term insights rather than relying on the retrospective accounts of interviewees (Graef, 2015, p 70; Lottholz, 2018c, p 713).

This practice-based, cooperative approach has two main advantages: first, it helps to establish a common language with practitioners in order to trace, contextualize and interpret their practices, making them more likely to accept cooperation and give the researcher firsthand access. Rather than settling for one specific issue a priori, my more open focus on peacebuilding and community security practices shifted the spotlight to the attempts made by these organizations and their local partners to maintain a secure and peaceful environment in southern Kyrgyzstan (Lottholz, 2017b; 2018c, pp 703ff). Such closer and more in-depth access foregrounds a more profound understanding of the practices and lifeworlds of participants and partners
(see Lottholz and Kluczewska, 2017), which in turn enables the examination of the role of various imaginaries of social order in shaping these practices.

Second, by focusing on practices themselves, instead of introducing specific and potentially unsuitable framings into the interaction, for instance about ‘conflict’ or ‘interethnic relations’, I could mitigate concerns that cooperation with me might bring these organizations into trouble with law enforcement and security services. Analyses of the preconditions for doing research in Kyrgyzstan in the aftermath of the ‘2010 events’ in and around Osh have shown how security actors such as the State Committee for National Security (GKNB) and local police have in fact instated a state monopoly on commentary and research relating to sensitive topics like interethnic relations or violent extremism (Bekmurzaev et al, 2018, p 105). The most visible case in point was an investigation into the international NGO Freedom House and its Kyrgyzstani partner Advocacy Centre for Human Rights for conducting a pilot survey project on interethnic relations in southern Kyrgyzstan which, according to the GKNB, could potentially have led to ‘interethnic discord’ (Beishenbek kyzy, 2014). Other cases, such as the detention of US–Pakistani journalist Umar Farooq in March 2015 in Osh on allegations of carrying ‘extremist material’, of Frederik Faust from Danish Church Aid (March 2014) and ICG analyst Conor Prasad (November 2012) (Mets, 2015; see Lottholz, 2017b) further confirmed the impression that authorities would not accept attempts by foreign researchers and organizations to do research on issues pertaining to national security. My awareness of these events and the constrained environment in Kyrgyzstan and adherence to principles of ‘do no harm’ informed my constant attempt to avoid situations that could place people who participated in my research at risk, as for instance by protecting their anonymity throughout the research process and also in the present monograph. As the following reflections from my fieldwork experience show, there were further access barriers and constraints that my cooperative and practice-based approach could not help to avoid or overcome.

A more fundamental caveat of this practice-based and open-ended approach concerns its relative silence about the way it is situated in the framework of institutionalized academic knowledge production and the limitations stemming therefrom. On a more pragmatic level, this means that my primary orientation as a researcher was on how the practices observed fit into my project and its conceptual and theoretical interests. While I did try to offer reflections and feedback on my partners’ work, these usually were not timely or substantive enough to help them decisively improve their work or generate better support. Furthermore, I chose to reduce the information about the project to the relatively standard phrasing about the role of globally dominant peacebuilding approaches, while not explicating the wider decolonial stance underpinning the study. This was done in an
attempt to keep things simple and not overburden interlocutors in their already generous efforts of participating in the research project. The idea was to put the inquiry into their work, struggles and imaginaries before and above my own theoretical interests and intellectual pursuit, and to work out the resonances between these two realms in the later stages of the research. It could be rightly argued that this precluded a more wholesome engagement and connection between my research partners’ peace and security work and the critical and decolonial perspective I am offering in this work. And further, it is true that in this way my endeavour remained embedded in a Eurocentric framework of knowledge production which gives research participants only a small stake in co-determining what is written about them, how it feeds into theory and what research outputs are delivered to which audiences. These limitations notwithstanding, I argue that the cooperative and dialogical approach that I developed throughout the project is the right way forward in trying to overcome the limitations of the Eurocentric episteme.

Reflections from fieldwork and beyond

Initially, my still vague idea of what cooperative research could look like in practice quickly took shape during my first cooperation with the UK-based NGO Saferworld, whose work is analysed in Chapter 5. Having met the head of the organization’s Central Asia office during an expert workshop in Bishkek and continued the conversation thereafter, I was invited to work in Saferworld’s main office in Osh to get to know their work, exchange perspectives and knowledge with staff, and to possibly collaborate with them in analysing the implementation of community security projects. The most insightful activity was supporting a contracted consultant in conducting profiling interviews with Local Crime Prevention Centres (LCPCs) across the south of Kyrgyzstan, which are discussed in Chapter 5. However, when it came to other interactions, I was told that my attendance was not conducive or not desired at all, as representatives of the national partner NGO and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) would be present. Being unable to attend training and community events held by LCPCs as part of Saferworld’s programme, I arranged follow-up visits with two of the LCPCs from the profiling interviews on my own initiative and soon focused on other collaborations. Furthermore, I was told that even though the MIA had been informed about the profiling visits, some of the LCPCs were subsequently visited by GKNB investigators who asked about the content of that interaction. This indicated that people are exposed to such ‘control visits’, even if interactions with external actors are legitimized as part of official cooperation between the MIA and well-established international NGOs.

The next cooperation involved the NGO network Civic Union ‘For Reforms and Result’ (see Chapter 7) which at the time was closely working
with Saferworld and received capacity-building support from it. The organization’s staff welcomed my offer to present a ‘view from the side’ (Ru.: vzgliad so storony) and were available for regular conversations as part of the organizational ethnography that I conducted in the head office in Bishkek, some of whose members became good friends. Yet, when it came to visiting and engaging with local communities who supported the work of the Civic Union, several encounters made me feel as if there was a glass wall preventing meaningful interaction with local community representatives. One example is a territorial council (a sub-unit of a city administration), where the chairman, a respected activist in the NGO network given the contributions he had made to police reform since 2010, was sympathetic to my project and the idea of doing focus groups, interviews and participatory observation, and so invited me to one of the weekly planning meetings (planerka) which included policemen, aksakal [elder] courts and community representatives. However, when I approached different participants after the meeting to introduce my research and invite them to participate, I was met with reluctance and failed to recruit a single participant. I had designed leaflets explaining and illustrating the purpose and content of my research, but these attempts to explain my research in intelligible terms were ignored. The chairman tried to explain: “For them, I am something like a superintendent [nachalnik], they tell me all of this in their own way. … Maybe they do not really like to talk to you because of the language, maybe they’re a bit embarrassed [to speak Russian].” Although not convinced, I had to acknowledge the impasse and the people’s obvious reluctance to participate in research conducted by foreigners. Given that this territorial council had been significantly affected by the 2010 conflict and its aftermath (see Chapter 4), the reservation was perhaps understandable, and I refrained from further efforts. Other similar episodes where my requests were viewed with suspicion (Lottholz, 2017b, p 16) confirmed the impression that some communities are too much affected by sensitive issues and thus require an especially sensitive approach with long-term preparation which I did not have the time for. As I demonstrate in further reflection on my role in community visits together with the Civic Union activists in Chapter 7, my presence as researcher and the cooperation with the network was perceived in positive terms when its purpose and benefits were properly explained by the network’s own activists.

The third cooperation was arranged with an initiative to strengthen Territorial Youth Councils in Osh (see Chapter 6), which, established to promote peace, tolerance and exchange among youth after the 2010 conflict, had been institutionalized as part of the Committee for Youth Affairs (CYA) of the Mayor’s Office. Having been allowed to participate in a youth forum to get to know the project and its participants from across the country, the implementing NGO told me that access to the project activities could only
be granted by the CYA. After some networking and contacting efforts, I managed to arrange a meeting with the committee’s head and presented an official letter with letterhead and phrased in the best bureaucratic manner, asking ‘for permission to conduct interviews and focus groups, during which I can ask those representatives who wish to take part in the research, questions on their work for the [youth councils]’ ‘[in order to obtain a more holistic [obshirnuiu] picture of the [project]’. While the spontaneous approval given by the committee head was a bureaucratic success, it turned out that it was certainly not a guarantee that the members of the TYC would participate in the research. Given that the committee head explained the purpose and content of my research to other people in the initiative only briefly, it was usually necessary to do so again when I asked people for interviews or permission to participate in events and meetings. I tried to maintain full transparency by sharing documentation on terms of consent and the project as a whole and generally did not perceive reservations about my research topic. Yet, the initially slow progress in finding interview partners and events to attend, and different behaviours and reactions on part of Territorial Youth Council members pointed to a degree of reluctance on their part.

The foot-dragging and piecemeal way of sharing information on their part was most obvious in the behaviour of my initial ‘contact person’ from the CYA, who seemed to be struggling to arrange contacts and kept excusing himself for this. When I told the committee head that things were not going well, I was appointed another contact person who arranged several interviews with youth council leaders and participation in a team meeting within just a day. This indicated that the youth activists’ interest and willingness to participate in the research depended, similar to the above example in the Civic Union, on who introduced me to them and how my position and activity was explained. Having become more aware of this, I took the opportunity during the official closing conference of the capacity-building project to introduce my research project and the possible benefits for the TYCs in front of everyone. I had underestimated the importance of doing so and kept a low profile during the youth forum in September when I had first been introduced to the initiative. When assessing the long-term interaction with TYCs, it was more selective and more difficult than in the case of the other two organizations, as I maintained contact and conducted follow-up conversations with key individuals who had been involved in implementation, while the relatively large number of interviewees and the changing life courses and interests reduced the long-term contacts to just a handful.

This experience during the fieldwork suggests three key takeaways, the first of which relates to the negotiation of access to relevant organizations and entities. While this aspect was overall successful, it demonstrated the importance of prior networks (Bekmurzaev et al., 2018, p 105), as all
representatives of my later cooperation partners had been introduced by existing contacts of mine, while the organizations I approached without prior networking agreed either to only give interviews or to no interaction at all. A more bureaucratic way of securing access without prior contact only worked once with the CYA in Osh, where access to TYC members was still subject to negotiation. The cooperative and practice-based approach turned out to be useful as it gave central importance to the conversation with the partnering entities’ members who appreciated the occasions to reflect on their work but also demonstrate their knowledge to a relatively inexperienced outsider.

Second, the difficulties I still faced once cooperative research had been agreed illustrate the important difference between getting general physical access to an entity – based on gatekeepers’ permission – and, on the other hand, actual ‘social access’ to the perspectives of the entity’s members (Bekmurzaev et al, 2018, p 105). Third and relatedly, the open framing of my research project around reception, application and resistance toward global notions of democratic governance and statebuilding was effective in helping avoid concerns associated with framings around sensitive issues such as interethnic relations or violent extremism. Taking such a cautious approach proved to be important, but not enough, as the experiences of not being able to engage people in communities affected by such security issues, as well as the ‘control visits’ to LCPCs where we had made the profiling interviews, demonstrates. Being a junior researcher with limited resources and institutional backing, I decided that it was better not to engage with communities and organizations who could have been put at risk by my presence and thus I did not follow up on research in one of the TYCs which had invited me to more visits and conversations. When considering this important opportunity, I concluded that leading conversations on the difficulties and discrimination faced by Uzbeks in this district would have posed too much of a danger both to the young activists and to myself, if the police had taken an interest in my activities. This exemplifies the close entanglement between attempts to ensure people’s safety and self-censorship, which I could merely balance by referencing work that documents the forms of exclusion, marginalization and violence that people in these communities are still subjected to (see Bennett, 2016; Ismailbekova and Karimova, 2018).

Fourth, these limitations incurred by the local security situation point to a broader concern about the limitations incurred by a foreign researcher’s positionality. In terms of language, it can be argued that my fluent command of Russian and collaboration with a translator in Kyrgyz-language events puts this project on a par with most area studies scholarship and ahead of many studies on peace, conflict and intervention which tend to rely on interpreters for communication other than in English. On the other hand, the limited time frame of my fieldwork did not allow the degree of immersion
and building of trustful relations as is the case in most anthropological work. I was thus much more dependent on people’s ability to trust or share information out of generosity, which limited my ability to cover the various aspects and topics pertaining to peace and security. For instance, apart from the few exceptions of outspoken people, I did not seem to be able to receive meaningful accounts about the current reality of interethnic relations, and particularly Uzbek lifeworlds in Osh, whereas ‘off the record’ information that I gathered from second- and third-hand accounts (“someone told me that …”) revealed dramatic fates that some of them suffered. For the reasons discussed above, I did not try to push further to get access to such accounts but prioritized my idea of people’s (at least momentary) safety over ambitions to produce a more revelatory account of peace and security in Kyrgyzstan. The analyses in the following chapters have to be seen in light of these limitations that my position as a foreigner, and additionally as a white, West European male, inevitably incurred and which are nevertheless balanced by a reliance on participatory observations and content analyses which are less affected by such concerns.

A final reflection concerns the more long-term experience with the cooperative and practice-based approach to research and especially regarding the idea of the dialogical knowledge production it entails (Bekmurzaev et al, 2018). The follow-up interaction with representatives from the three partner organizations has been of varying intensity, but overall indicated a sizeable gap between their and my respective priorities. For instance, the articles, policy papers and blog posts in which I described the Civic Union’s work in an accessible language, including in Russian (see Lottholz, 2016a, 2016b, 2020), helped to raise their visibility, but to what extent they may really have influenced donors’ or national partners’ perception of the network is hard to grasp and is most likely negligible. Further, the peer-reviewed articles on the network (Lottholz, 2018c, 2021) as well as on Saferworld’s work (Lottholz, 2018b), and not least this monograph, were published too late to offer significant help in positioning these actors. In terms of content, my analyses of community-level project implementation did not yield decisive insights for the practitioners and mostly served to provide further reflection on the dilemmas of community security when considered in the wider societal and political-economic context. Thus, interlocutors mostly told me that they and their partners in the communities were more or less aware of the aspects I had raised and were trying to address them.¹

This limited usefulness of the reflections that I fed back to the partners is perhaps inevitable given the primary interest of my research in tracing,

¹ Skype interview with representative of Civic Union ‘For Reforms and Result’, 26 March 2016; correspondence with Saferworld representative, March 2016.
mapping and understanding the practices and discourses that they were already familiar with. Further, my embedding of their work in wider imaginaries of statebuilding and trajectories of post-liberal statebuilding have, somewhat unsurprisingly, not yielded decisive critiques and reconsiderations, either. Nevertheless, the fact that someone dedicated extensive time and effort to mapping and contextualizing this work has arguably served to highlight its importance, complexity and long-term impact and thus also generated a degree of appreciation on a personal and emotional level. These less tangible aspects of research collaboration need to be borne in mind and foreground what Lara Montesinos Coleman has called an ‘ethos of critique’ (2015), by which the remoteness of activist struggles and academic inquiry can be embraced and traversed in a relation of dialogue and mutual support. That is, while acknowledging the inherent limitations of our actions and ability to influence the status quo, an ‘ethos of critique’ unites researchers and practitioners in their interest in what can be done to gradually and incrementally expose, undermine, and dismantle the forces maintaining present injustice.

Conclusion

This chapter has further apprehended the empirical analysis of the book in three conceptual steps. First, it has presented Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia as an entry point to appreciate and analytically grasp the multiplicity of worldviews and knowledge that remain unappreciated in largely Euro- and Western-centric scholarship on processes of political ordering in the non-West. Second, it has introduced and developed a concept to capture such heteroglossia, namely the ‘social imaginary’ based on the works of Castoriadis, Taylor and more recent cultural studies scholarship. Although still somewhat abstract, this discussion already indicates the clear advancement that this approach offers compared with existing research on peace- and statebuilding. Thus, contestations about the kind of political system to be built in a given place, the role of historical legacies of colonialism and dependency or of relations between humans and nature and the spiritual domain, can be made visible and explicated through the analysis of imaginaries of social order. Not least Castoriadis’ own later work on ecological imaginaries indicated this necessary broadening of the horizon beyond Western rationalist and metaphysical ontologies.

In the final section, I have discussed the cooperative and practice-based approach taken in this research and situated it both in the wider context and in reflections from my experiences during and after fieldwork. This reflection on the limitations of my own abilities to access and reveal at least some of the realities of life in contemporary Kyrgyzstan are a crucial part of critical social inquiry. Yet, as I have demonstrated here and as will become
clear throughout the empirical chapters, the cooperative approach taken in this research proved to be of decisive value in navigating the security issues faced and in examining how discourses and imaginaries of social order are invoked in, and thus substantively shape, people’s understandings and practice of peacebuilding and community security.