we would like to see covered in a seminal book like this, but topics like decoloniality, indigeneity, cultural heritage, indigenous capitalism, or human-environment relations have rapidly gained traction within Central Asia, especially with a younger generation of scholars. Including them, or indeed any one of them as a part of the book would have allowed for the inclusion of research topics that may not seem plausible for western readers at a first glance.

The book is aimed at a wider interested public and, as the "discussion questions" at the end of each part and the "further reading sections" suggest, primarily for teaching. The division of the parts into chapters that deal with more general aspects of a topic and into case studies works well and provides a good structure. Different layouts for the topic chapters of each part and the case studies add to reader-friendliness with the small exception of the picture credits for which, unfortunately, an unsuitable script has been chosen that runs too densely to be easily readable. The decision to relegate footnotes to a separate pdf and not include them in the book seems unfortunate for a volume dedicated to teaching. It is obvious that questions of space would have played the main role her, but space could have been gained if the "discussion questions" had been abandoned. While they partly give good incentives for discussions, they could easily be brought up by professors and teachers individually while the weaker ones are hardly suitable for teaching.

The approach through context is strongest and works best in my view when it permits authors to overcome national boundaries and to highlight the temporality, contingency, and fluidity of borders, traditions and structures, and as well as the connectivities and multiple directions people chose for themselves. Context, as the section "About this Book" says, is crucial for understanding and valuing others and their circumstances. All of the above said, *Central Asia: Contexts for Understanding* provides many of these important contexts and is seminal reading for everyone interested in but not yet familiar with the region. Especially those of us who engage in teaching will gratefully refer to it.

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Polygynous Marriages among the Kyrgyz: Institutional Change and Endurance. By Michele E. Commercio. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022. ix, 268 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Tables. $55.00, hard bound.
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In *Polygynous Marriages among the Kyrgyz*, political scientist Michele E. Commercio asks why polygyny has been "normalized" among ethnic Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan. Commercio's analysis draws on rational choice theory, which says agents make strategic calculations to maximize well-being, as well as historical institutionalism, which says that as people strategize, their choices are shaped by their worldview and perceptions of how their choices will be

viewed by others. Commercio applies these perspectives to her voluminous fieldwork data, collected during five years of research, to argue that polygyny must be understood with reference to a "hegemonic" construction of gender that has changed slowly in Central Asia over the last century, despite significant political and social shifts.

The hegemonic construction of gender Commercio references reinforces and is reinforced by other Central Asian institutions, such as Islam and *adat* (customary practice). It assigns Kyrgyz men and women complementary social roles based on idealized constructions of masculinity and femininity. It says that men should become husbands, heads of the household and patriline, and social leaders. It says that women should marry and maintain the wellbeing of the household and continuation of the patriline. A man increases his status by becoming a father, providing generously for his family, and establishing his authority in his community. A woman increases her status by demonstrating her chastity, by giving birth to sons, and by serving as the "keeper of the hearth" (117).

Commercio uses data from focus groups and structured interviews conducted in urban areas to demonstrate that polygyny helps individual Kyrgyz increase their status and fulfill social obligations in light of this dominant construction of gender and in the post-independence context of economic dislocation. These data suggest that practicing polygyny increases a man's social status because it signals to his community that he can provide for more than one household (whether or not his wives actually rely on him for economic support—Commercio notes that since independence, many women have become their households' breadwinners). Polygyny also allows a man to avoid the stigma of divorce if a first marriage proves emotionally unsatisfying or if a first wife is barren. For women on the unforgiving Kyrgyz marriage market (where the number of viable men is consistently lower than the number of single women), polygyny offers single women and women in unsatisfying marriages a way to avoid spinsterhood or divorce and the stigma attached to single and divorced women (and their children).

Despite polygyny's "tangible and/or symbolic dividends" (178) the choice to enter a polygynous marriage is still a "patriarchal bargain," Commercio argues, citing Deniz Kandiyoti.[1] A patriarchal bargain is made when an individual conforms to patriarchal values or structures in order to secure a perceived personal benefit. Commercio concludes that the decision to marry polygynously "is made in constraining circumstances that curtail the degree of agency" of Kyrgyz men and women, and yet they benefit from doing so, in the form of increased status and economic security (200).

Polygynous Marriages among the Kyrgyz is a compelling and provocative work of scholarship, but it has several shortcomings. The first issue is the framing of the project as an effort to explain the "normalization" of polygyny. This framing calls to mind an article by anthropologist Gerald D. Berreman. Berreman believed that the extensive research of his day on polyandry was

1. Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender and Society* 2, no. 3 (1988): 274–90.

evidence of the (mostly male) profession's "androcentric bias" (1975).[2] In his telling, male anthropologists published more often on polyandry, which is rare, because it seemed counter-intuitive to them, and neglected polygyny, which is common, because they perceived it as "more plausible, expectable, and perhaps agreeable."[3] Berreman's observation suggests that a book, published almost fifty years later, that puzzles over the normalization of polygyny in Central Asia could be considered evidence of women scholars' successes, but it also demonstrates a persistent but unhelpful "monogamist" bias in Central Asian studies. Decades of anthropological research have established that despite the glorification of heterosexual monogamy by communists and other self-consciously "modern" societies, this is simply not the only way people mate, or even the most common: monogamy is not the default category any more than polygyny is an aberration.

For help with addressing this monogamist bias, Commercio could have consulted feminist poststructuralist literature. Commercio cites Judith Butler briefly, but she might also have consulted Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women," which examines how kinship systems replicate not only patriarchy but also heterosexuality and, one could surmise, monogamy (1975).[4] Reading Rubin, one learns that kinship systems are coercive in that they impose one model of gender (binary), one model of kinship (also binary; blood vs. marriage), one type of sexual desire (heterosexual), one model of marriage (the heterosexual, monogamous pair bond), and one model of exchange (capitalist) on humans with diverse predispositions and desires. Another useful text is Sherry Ortner's "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" which offers insights relevant to the normal/abnormal binary that structures Commercio's argument.[5] These essays are foundational to a still growing body of literature by gender and queer theorists that has destabilized common assumptions about gender, sexuality, the family, and marriage. Beyond informing a critique of monogamist bias, this literature might have encouraged Commercio to pause her discussion of polygyny to examine other significant empirical findings, such as her finding that many Kyrgyz women, whether married to polygynous men or not, are deeply unsatisfied with their experiences of marriage, love, and family.

Another area of scholarship missing in the book is postcolonialism. Again, Commercio briefly discusses a key theorist—Lila Abu-Lughod—but she does not offer the reflexive commentary I expected of an author foreign to the society in which she worked and studying a practice she explicitly rejects.[6] A reflexive commentary informed by postcolonial insights would have offered

2. Gerald D. Berreman, "Himalayan Polyandry and the Domestic Cycle," *American Ethnologist: The Journal of the American Ethnological Society* 2, no. 1 (February 1975): 127–38.

3. Ibid., 137.

4. Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in Rayna R. Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York, 1975), 157–210.

5. Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Stanford, 1974), 67–88.

6. Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing against Culture," in Richard G. Fox, ed., *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe, 1991), 137–62.

the added benefit of addressing concerns regarding Commercio's reliance on a professional research firm to conduct the focus groups that yielded much of her data. To her credit, she is transparent about this choice and writes compellingly about the firm's experience and prior successes, but some readers may still wonder what subtleties get lost when a scholar studying a practice as intimate as polygyny does not interact with their key informants.

Commercio notes that her intention is not to do ethnography but to work with her data "ethnographically," which means she wants to use her data to understand the worldviews of her informants. This she does masterfully, although here I will offer one final correction. Nestled among passages of insightful analysis was the occasional claim that even if informants did not mention a specific theme, the theme should not be assumed to be unimportant to an understanding of polygyny. For example, although respondents rarely discussed sexual desire or romantic love as reasons for marriage, Commercio comments that this reticence "does not mean that these factors did not contribute" to a decision to marry (206). This follows logically, of course, but it is problematic to apply this logic to ethnographic data. Once accepted, that logic removes all limits to what themes can be included in an analysis. A better approach is to limit analysis to the themes explicitly mentioned by informants.

Polygynous Marriages among the Kyrgyz is an important book. As a record of Kyrgyz experiences and perspectives, it will be a useful reference for decades to come. Commercio argues compellingly that oppressive structures, and especially patriarchal structures, provide comfort and thus remain attractive as strategic options for people navigating difficult historical contexts. The book's limitation is that it does not look critically at which structures are oppressive and how. Commercio's focus on the way uniquely Kyrgyz constructions of gender strengthen patriarchy obscures the way marital and kinship constructions common across modern, capitalist societies lead to more pernicious forms of oppression—forms that impact us all.

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Staging Democracy: Political Performance in Ukraine, Russia, and Beyond. By Jessica Pisano. Ithaca: Northern Illinois University Press, an Imprint of Cornell University Press, 2022. xviii, 233 pp. Notes. Index. $125.00 cloth, $24.95 paper.
doi: 10.1017/slr.2023.295

Jessica Pisano's focus on the everyday political economy of electoral participation in *Staging Democracy* makes an insightful contribution to the literature on state management of elections and protest across regime types. Based on a framework grounded in dramatic theory, Pisano relies on evidence from the post-Soviet empire states to show how state actors engage citizens in political performances that project regime support and mask the effects of economic precarity and state dependence on patterns of political participation.