

David Sneath. *Mongolia Remade: Post-socialist National Culture, Political Economy, and Cosmopolitics*

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In December 2018, I joined my Mongolian colleagues in Ulaanbaatar for dinner; it was no surprise that David Sneath's new book quickly came up as a topic of conversation. My colleagues had yet to obtain a copy of their own, but their excitement was tremendous. Sneath, the director of the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit at Cambridge, is a leading figure in Mongolian anthropology and widely respected in the field. What was not clear to my colleagues was that Sneath's book is a collection of previously published essays and articles, bookended by an introduction and a conclusion. Their confusion is understandable – the description offered by Amsterdam University Press does not indicate that eight out of ten chapters are reprints of work that previously appeared in journals or edited volumes. (The only clear indication of this is a footnote on the first page of the introduction.) Most curiously, the original publication details are nowhere to be found in the book. An Acknowledgements section thanks a list of publishers for permission to reprint each chapter, but even from this the original dates and publication titles are omitted. This is all to say that one would be forgiven for thumbing through this new book and believing it to be, well, new.

This makes a reviewer's task somewhat fraught. There are issues with reprinting, in unaltered form, decade-old chapters and claiming them to document the present-day reality of a nation with 'a tumultuous history of sweeping change' (p. 13). In any event, *Mongolia Remade* has excellent value as an omnibus of Sneath's work, much of which is not readily available online in academic databases. In that capacity, some of these chapters would serve many regional scholars well. For the moment, then, it seems useful to establish a tentative separation between form and substance.

Sneath groups his chapters into three themes: 'the construction of national culture', 'the transformation of political economy', and 'the re-introduction of cosmological politics'. This grouping suggests a highly contemporary treatment of Mongolian goings-on, but the real focus in Sneath's work is historical. The bulk of nearly every chapter is dedicated to parsing

the story of how a complex nation came to be. Sneath's work in this regard is frequently brilliant. The introductory chapter provides the most concise and successful treatment of general Mongolian history that I have ever read. As a historian, Sneath embraces a wide variety of actors. Individuals, aristocracies, geopolitics, environments, religions, civil societies, economies – all are welcome in these multi-agential accounts. Grand narratives are nowhere to be found, perhaps to the chagrin of readers who might prefer a more politicised history.

But while these accounts are remarkably readable, they are not often followed by analyses of equal depth. Chapter 8, for instance, describes the ubiquitous Mongolian mountain blessings called *ovoo*. After an exhaustive comparison of *ovoo* and their Tibetan analogues, the chapter rather suddenly arrives at a conclusion. Its key finding: perhaps there was 'a repertoire of mutually comprehensible politico-ritual institutions' (p. 174) across Inner Asia from the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries. Thematically assigned to 'the re-introduction of cosmological politics' in a volume titled *Mongolia Remade*, such a chapter feels decidedly abbreviated. Many authors have shown the central relevance of Inner Asian political ritual in contemporary Mongolia (e.g. Pedersen 2011; High 2017), but Sneath declines to undertake his own analysis to demonstrate as much.

While many chapters are characterised by similarly descriptive agendas, there are some notable exceptions. The most engaging entry in the volume is an ambitious comparison of Soviet-era electrification and Mongolian scapulimancy, a practice of fortune telling that reads the charred shoulder blades (scapula) of sheep. Sneath draws these two themes together, each fascinating in its own right, and ambitiously juggles them. He plays language games with the Mongolian words for *light*, *enlightened*, and the honorific given to the senior lama of the Buddhist church (p. 148). He considers whether the function of electric light is metaphorical or metonymical. He offers mirthful stories of Mongolians in the earliest days of electrification. Of scapulimancy, Sneath does the same, comparing anecdotes, histories, and pages from pamphlets collected in the monastery district of Ulaanbaatar. He elucidates key similarities and differences in these practices to focus a discussion of the 'colonization of the imagination' (p. 145). There is a whimsy to these pages that shows Sneath at his finest, deftly assembling stories and picking them apart, favouring improbable coexistence

over improbable contradiction, and arriving at incisive analyses. Throughout these pages his anthropological capabilities are on full display: he documents delightfully authentic interactions, and his impressive command of Mongolian facilitates a linguistic ethnography that is beyond the reach of many other scholars (myself included). He concludes this chapter,

Imagination is not only an instrument of perception and anticipation – it generates its own goals and motivations. Rather than regarding it as another realm in which to map conquest and dominance, we may find it more rewarding to explore the ways in which we continuously expand our vistas through the multiplication of imaginative styles. (p. 161)

It is precisely this sort of critique, nimble and ambitious, that established Sneath as a revered scholar. But *Mongolia Remade's* extensive focus on reconstructing history leaves relatively little space for this sort of analysis.

Sneath's proclivity for exhaustive histories also leads to a rather problematic loss of political edge from his writing. For instance, despite its appearance in the volume's title, his treatment of cosmopolitics is fairly cursory. The word itself (or some permutation thereof), appears in the body text of Sneath's book eleven times; even those occurrences are limited to five pages. The year is 2018 and referencing cosmopolitics has become the anthropological equivalent of passing 'Go' on a Monopoly board. But cosmopolitics is more than a pretty name: it carries a political heft that offers a potent corrective to global conflict.

It has become a common error to overlook the *political* element of Isabelle Stengers' coin – suddenly anything involving governance and non-Western cosmologies is assumed to be 'cosmopolitical'. In his outstanding essay, 'Whose Cosmos, Which Cosmopolitics' (2004), Bruno Latour highlights the tension and contest at the heart of Stengers' critique.

'Westerners', he writes,

have not understood themselves as facing on the battlefield an enemy whose victory is possible, just irrational people who have to be corrected ... But things have

changed of late and our wars are now wars of the worlds, because it's now the makeup of the cosmos that is at stake. (p. 455)

Cosmopolitics is not possible without plural cosmologies; it is *political* because those cosmologies conflict, often violently. Sneath's Mongolia couldn't be more different. In the contemporary Mongolia Sneath describes, cosmologies are hardly contested; they may tremble at the edges, but there is fairly stable cosmic centre. Indeed, Sneath identifies this centre as a fundamental tenet of the post-Soviet Mongolian political identity (p. 192). Thus, when Sneath writes of 'cosmopolitic[s] in the sense that nonhuman entities were included in the political structures and processes of the state' (p. 187) he misses the point: the act of *inclusion* is cosmopolitics' antithesis. Cosmopolitics is the storm that rages outside, while *inclusion* sits cosily by the fire, having already completed the journey through the inclement cosmic weather.

This drive-by approach to political theory is common in Sneath's chapters, with the notable exception of the analysis of scapulimancy and electrification. Mongolia is a fascinating place, but it cannot be fully described outside of the structural violence and political inequalities that dominate the present-day social landscape. To be sure, there are genuine cosmopolitical struggles afoot in Mongolia today, most prominently in the country's hyperactive extractive industries. Representing Mongolia – and providing analytic perspectives that usefully contribute to the nation's future – requires more than historical perspectives. Even Sneath's final chapter, a phenomenal summary of contemporary Mongolian politics and political economy, falls flat in this regard. Sneath closes his book by referencing 'the normative projects of imagining Mongolia's future' (p. 209), yet contributes relatively little to that effort beyond descriptive historical accounts.

As mentioned earlier, the structure of Sneath's book – a collected volume of previously published works – raises a separate question, this time of form rather than content. The 'North-East Asian Studies' series that features *Mongolia Remade* 'presents ground-breaking research on North-East Asia' (p. 2). Yet the chapters of Sneath's book are on average a decade old (the median publication date is 2009/10). Ten years in post-Soviet societies frequently encompasses expansive social, political and economic changes, and Mongolia is

no exception. (Perhaps this explains the volume's apparent reluctance to indicate the republished nature of its contents.) While the chapters are presented as *chapters* rather than entries in an edited volume, they appear entirely unmodified. For instance, Chapter 3, 'The Rural and the Urban in Pastoral Mongolia', describes urbanisation in Ulaanbaatar, a city that seemingly reinvents itself every several years. Yet the chapter, written in 2006, contains no information about the past twelve years of urban transformation that have taken the city from a recovering Soviet capital to a site of simmering cosmopolitan energy. Most bizarrely, the chapter features a graph – the only data visualisation in the entire book – with 'Mongolia Urban and Rural Population, 1990-2002' (p. 59). Sneath did not update this figure with the past sixteen years of population data despite their ready availability. Similar oddities occur throughout the book elsewhere, such as in Chapter 4, which tells how 'poor pastoralists are generally the most vulnerable to shocks such as *zud* [extreme cold], and many thousands have had their livelihoods destroyed *in the last two years*' (p. 100, emphasis mine). To reiterate: nowhere in the text does it mention that Chapter 4 was published in a 2004 book. Nor were thousands of livelihoods destroyed by *zud* from 2016–18.

Even the most forgiving reader can't help but question these editorial anomalies. Perhaps the strangest occurrence is the same sentence appearing in four separate chapters, largely unchanged:

1. This trebled the number of workers directly reliant on pastoralism for their livelihood from less than 18% of the national workforce in 1989 to 50% of the working population in 1998 (Chapter 4, p. 80).
2. This trebled the number of workers directly reliant on pastoralism for their livelihood from less than 18% of the national workforce in 1989 to 50% of the working population in 1998 (Chapter 6, p. 133).
3. It also trebled the number of workers directly reliant on pastoralism for their livelihood from 135,000 in 1989 (less than 18% of the national work force) to nearly 400,000 in 1996 (nearly 50% of the working population) (Chapter 1, p. 33).

4. The number of registered herders more than trebled since reforms began, from 135,420 in 1989 (less than 18% of the national workforce) to 407,030 in 2001, almost 50% of the working population (Chapter 3, p. 70).

Such oddities are indicative of issues that are more significant than stylistic complaints. For instance, no effort was made to bring these chapters in line with the volatilities of recent Mongolian history, reflect theoretical developments or even update statistics. John Harriss and Craig Jeffrey, in their 2013 review of a similarly-conceived volume by Akhil Gupta, write that ‘The book seems to have been written in 2006, mainly by bringing together previously published articles and framing them with reference to new conceptual developments ... The book presents no systematic ethnography’ (p. 508). Unfortunately, the same could be written of *Mongolia Remade*, but with an effective publication date closer to 2012. By my count, six out of ten chapters cite no work published after 2010. Yet these same chapters deal with highly contemporary issues, such as urbanisation, the construction of national identity, the role of religion in statecraft and land rights. In their original form, these articles were undoubtedly current; their presentation here as ‘articles ... concerned with the historical processes that have produced contemporary Mongolia’ (p. 9) is problematic, given that the contents are more often than not disengaged from the current decade’s historical and academic developments. What is absent from *Mongolia Remade* is any clear explanation as to why these articles are being reprinted without being updated. Sneath tells us that ‘the work collected in this volume attempts to shed light on some of the diverse historical processes by which the New Mongolia has been constructed amid the ruins of the Old’ (p. 34), but the text does not address why they’ve been collected in this form, or why now?

Those of us in regional studies admire authors such as Anna Tsing, James Ferguson and Marisol de la Cadena (all cited in *Mongolia Remade*), who elucidate truths that feel relevant across the world. But *Mongolia Remade* seems uncertain of its identity: is it a retrospective for the past fifteen years of Sneath’s brilliant historical anthropology, a study of contemporary Mongolia or a more ambitious text seeking to escape the silo of regional studies? The nature of the volume – including the ‘very general introduction ... for those unfamiliar with Mongolia’ (p. 12) – suggests that Sneath’s ambitions lie with a more general

readership. But there is still some distance left to cover. Historical accounts alone will not suffice, for historical accounts are always specific. The sort of text that facilitates the 'normative projects of imagining Mongolia's future' (p. 209) – or any future, for that matter – requires an analytic and political commitment that treads the causeway between telling *what happened* and telling *what is*. It was the anticipation of the latter that generated so much eagerness among my Mongolian colleagues. Indeed, it is what lends our work significance in the first place.

*Stephen Lezak*

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