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Sovereignty and the Paradox of Statehood: Moldova and Transnistria

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Abstract

This paper begins by presenting a rough theoretical sketch of sovereignty as it relates generally to the post-Soviet sphere, particularly to Transnistria, a frozen conflict in Moldova (Sovereignty: Theory). Using ethnographic data and analysis that I gathered in the summer of 2006 (The Field: Transnistria, Ethnographic Data), I sketch the outlines of a concept of sovereignty that relates the material to the ideological, taking into account how the economic and the political operate in everyday life. As a contribution to the theme of the summer school, some notes on crises and conflicts are added as they relate to Transnistria, as well as to the former Soviet Union (Conclusion).

Introduction¹

With the demise of the Soviet Union, the titular republics “created” by the Soviet Union emerged as sovereign states.² While some had an existence that preceded the Soviet period, others did not. Each titular republic inherited the borders, peoples, histories, and infrastructure of the Soviet state. With Moldova, the end of the Soviet Union sparked a civil war that still divides the country. Moldova’s current borders encompass a polity containing two territories never jointly administered – Moldova proper and Transnistria. Historically, neighbouring nations and empires (Romania, Imperial Russia, Ottoman, Soviet) viewed Moldova as a vessel for their own concerns, be they historical, ethnic, geopolitical, or nationalist; this lack of an indigenous political centre raises important issues related to sovereignty and the state.

This paper explores different forms of sovereignty and state mediation in Transnistria. Specifically, I look at how statehood and sovereignty – the exercise of power by the state over a delimited territory – figure into the lives of individuals, into political and economic institutions, and into the formation of social groups. How does the normative model of states as sovereign entities conflict with the everyday life in Transnistria? What purpose do the various tropes of transformation as well as the spectre of a coloured “revolution” serve? How is the state made meaningful, and how do citizens relate to this unrecognised state?

Generally, this paper explores what happens at the margins of empire when the social and economic structures that “guaranteed” the past disappear. Moldova proper was part of Imperial Russia, then Romania in the Interwar period, and finally the Soviet Union in 1940. Transnistria, however, was created by Stalin in 1924 from Ukraine – its purpose was to further Soviet influence in Romania. This genealogy – with its borders, infrastructure, and population developed according to Soviet desires – pervades the present. One anthropologist sums up Moldova’s complex situation with the following set of questions:

- Should Moldova exist as an independent country?
- Should Moldova unite with Romania?
- Is the majority of the population “Romanian”?
- Is there a “Moldovan” identity that is not simply “Romanian”?
- Should the state’s boundaries and/or local structures of governance be changed to better represent ethnic, regional, or other interests?³

Transnistria in its current form emerged during an armed struggle with Moldova in 1992. Once a centre of Soviet industry, it is now a *de facto* sovereign state but unrecognised. Viewed by the western media as a ‘black hole’ of corruption, smuggling, and criminality, the area is currently an object of contention between Moldova – a country seeking to join the EU and to integrate its territory – and Russia, flush with oil wealth

1 Research for this paper was conducted in the Republic of Moldova (Chisinau) and in Transnistria (Tiraspol, Bender, Dnestrovsk) in 2006. Preliminary field research was made possible thanks to a grant from Institute for European Studies and the Peace Studies Program at Cornell University.

2 See Hirsch, Francine: *Empire of Nations*. Ithaca: Cornell 2005 and Martin, Terry: *The Affirmative Action Empire*. Ithaca: Cornell 2001.

3 Cash, Jennifer: *Reviving Moldova: Social and Political Dimensions of Contemporary Folkloric Performances*, in *The Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 2004 (vol. 22) No. 1, pp. 61–76.

and (re)asserting its influence across the former Soviet Union. Transnistria is exceptional because, in the face of ongoing non-recognition, it has built up state structures and institutions rivalling those in Moldova.⁴ It also boasts a security service capable of neutralising and/or co-opting political, social, or economic threats to the status quo.

Sovereignty: Theory

As a juridical concept, sovereignty feeds upon widely divergent bodies of knowledge, including (but not limited to) politics, theology, statecraft, ideology, economics, and, lest one forget, knowledge and experiences forged amidst the constraints of the past and the anticipated future. Schmitt writes “the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.”⁵ Only within this bifurcated reality can politics occur: “the sovereign is he who decides on the exception.”⁶ Shifting from decisionism to the practical, Krasner defines sovereignty four ways: *international legal sovereignty*: the practices associated with mutual recognition of independent states; *Westphalian sovereignty*: political organisation based upon the exclusion of external actors from authority structures; *domestic sovereignty*: the formal organisation and effective control of political authority; and *interdependence sovereignty*: the ability of authorities to regulate the flow of information, people, or capital across state borders.⁷

Historically, the state and its representatives have been the holders of sovereignty since the Peace of Westphalia (1648) ended interventions by monarchs in the religious affairs of other states.⁸ Modern notions of sovereignty are bound to negotiations, prohibitions, and the right to exercise these powers. Sovereignty works through territory and borders where a representative excludes or includes *qua* sovereign. In anthropology, particularly, research on sovereignty is influenced by Foucault’s *governmentality*; much ethnographic writing focuses on the production of political subjectivities or on the regulative – the *biopolitical* – aspects of it.⁹ In contrast to these approaches, I look to the material and the semiotic (symbolic) realms to understand how individuals meaningfully relate to the variety of forms the state takes.

In the post-Soviet space, one may find structures that transcend or compliment the state, often creating the law in the absence of a formal (post-Soviet) state presence (e.g., security companies that commodify force and enforce contract law). What Humphrey terms “localized forms of sovereignty” may remain nested within higher (state) domains that still may control life/death insofar as they are “exclusions” beyond a central state domain.¹⁰ Often these take the form of racketeers or mafia organisations that blur the line between the criminal and the state.¹¹ Many of these emerged from the Soviet period; in Transnistria, these

4 King, Charles: The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia’s Unrecognized States, in *World Politics*, 2001 (vol. 53), no. 4, pp. 524–552.

5 Schmitt, Carl: *The Concept of the Political*. Chicago: Chicago, 1996 [1932], p. 26.

6 Schmitt, Carl: *Political Theology*. Chicago: Chicago, 2004 [1922], p. 5.

7 Krasner, Stephen: *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*. Princeton: Princeton, 1999, pp. 4–5, 9–25.

8 Philpott, Daniel: *Sovereignty*, 2003. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sovereignty/>.

9 Foucault, Michel: *Governmentality*, in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, Peter Miller (eds.): *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: Chicago, , pp. 87–105. For recent biopolitical treatments of sovereignty, see Agamben, Giorgio: *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare life*. Stanford: Stanford, 1998 and Agamben, Giorgio .

10 Humphrey’s uses the example of the marshrut system in Ulan-Ude, where various microbus routes incorporate different disciplinary regimes and modes of governmentality. The system is not constructed in opposition to the state; rather it has the capacity to encompass different publics and bodies, from the individual drivers to higher state officials. See Humphrey, Caroline: *Sovereignty*, in Nugent and Vincent, (eds.): *A Companion to the Anthropology of Politics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004 pp. 418–436.

11 One should keep in mind that in the USSR the state was not a bounded entity but was instead coextensive with the whole of the people (*narod*). As an explicitly revolutionary project, those excluded from the state domain were for the most part political enemies and not criminals or outcasts. The Bolsheviks borrowed from criminal practices (violence and expropriation) in response to the need to regulate the economy in the aftermath of the Russian civil war. Thus Soviet law was thoroughly instrumental, being rooted in a revolutionary state-building project. See Humphrey, Caroline: *The Unmaking*

networks arose inside the Soviet state. Generally speaking, these informal social and economic practices – informal and formal economies, along with concomitant social networks – challenge the legitimate state authority of Moldova and Transnistria but *do not necessarily* undermine state power.¹² While sovereignty remains adequately theorised at the state or national level, at the *de facto* level one may glimpse the actual operation of politics. Following Humphrey, I see the *actualities of relations* in the former Soviet Union as not simply acquiescing to the menace of sovereignty but interposing a domain that may operate collaterally or against the (recognised) state.¹³ From this perspective, the multiple illegitimate, criminal, and informal economies and political configurations that sustain Transnistria are not blank spots on the sovereign map but practices that reflect the society in which the Transnistrian state is embedded.¹⁴

The Field: Transnistria

Transnistria is an exceptional state because authorities rely on coercive domestication of political and economic power. In practice, this exceptionalism emerges in the form of an enemy presence that threatens to broach the tenuous status quo – authorities domesticate and politically utilise this potential for instability. Practically speaking, the guarantor of Transnistria is the continued presence of Russian peacekeeping troops, an outgrowth of the Soviet period. Transnistria's strategic significance in the Soviet period informs current discussions. As the westernmost boundary of the Soviet Union, Moldova was integral to Soviet military strategy. Transnistria boasted a substantial armaments industry and a large military community dating to the end of World War II. With the military central to the economic and social life, the region became “one of the most highly Sovietized territories within the union.”¹⁵ With four-fifths of the region's population employed in the defence industry, the region had a distinct military presence, epitomising loyalty to Soviet ideals. This military industrial complex only heightened the stakes when the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Residents of this separatist region paradoxically live in an area that is simultaneously both a “rogue” region and a nostalgic Soviet homeland.¹⁶

Ethnographic Data

In lieu of an introduction to fieldwork I offer two anecdotes, the first from Moldova, the second from Transnistria. As I sat across the desk from the director of a Moldovan NGO explaining my project, the topic – sovereignty and statehood in Moldova & Transnistria – annoyed him. Not even delving into the abstract, he stated with the performative force of a realist that “Moldova is a sovereign state.”¹⁷ As I inquired about its separatist region and the Russian troops stationed there, I was told that the EU and NATO would solve the issue, and that I – the American anthropologist – knew little about the problem. After this, I was treated to a lecture on the weakness of the Russian Federation and the “post-colonial” situation that makes Transnistrian statehood possible.

As I crossed the border into Transnistria, I was treated to an ad hoc questioning and shuffled amongst offices, each time needing to explain my presence. During each interaction, be it a passport check or a simple query, I was astutely aware that I was in an exceptional space, at the border of a place where the decisions demanded by the situation held more weight than the formalities of a liberal democracy. As I waited for my

of Soviet Life. Ithaca: Cornell 2002, pp. 99–126.

12 Roitman, Janet: Fiscal Disobedience. Princeton: Princeton, 2005.

13 Humphrey, Caroline: Sovereignty, in Nugent and Vincent (eds): A Companion to the Anthropology of Politics. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004 pp. 418–436.

14 Geertz, Clifford: What Is a State If It Is Not a Sovereign?, in: Current Anthropology (vol. 45), No. 5, pp. 577–593.

15 King, Charles: The Moldovans. Stanford: Hoover, 2000, p. 184.

16 For a provocative discussion on the interrelatedness of the rogue to democracy and sovereignty, see Derrida, Jacques: Rogues: Two Essays on Reason. Stanford: Stanford, 2005.

17 Interview, July 2006 with director of NGO in Chisinau.

passport, I surveyed the infrastructure surrounding the border: the tanks in the distance, the watchtower, the customs control, the concrete bunkers, the guns, and the reality of this “state.”

What are the normative assumptions of the former, and how can one approach the exceptional nature of the latter? While it may seem a truism, much of what I describe is predicated on the self-deployed idea of Transnistrian distinctiveness vis-à-vis Moldova.¹⁸ Paradoxically, this difference emerged only in 1992 during the war. The actual causes of the conflict emerge from local criminal disputes that took on a spurious national character in the context of the end of the Soviet Union. At the basic level, we have a situation whereby Moldova declares independence and, according to its history, initially sought closer cultural, political, and linguistic ties with Romania; Transnistria, however, utilised the multi-ethnic (i.e., friendship and brotherhood of the peoples) template of the Soviet state and used it as a discourse to resist linguistic assimilation – a perceived forced Romanianisation, i.e. the imposition of Romanian as the state language.

I. The Materiality of Sovereignty

My first case study focuses on the “Battle of Bender” and its subsequent institutionalisation in Transnistria.¹⁹ At the *Memorial Museum of the Bender Tragedy*, one may experience the materiality of Transnistrian sovereignty actively, for on display one finds, among other things, weapons, symbols, personal effects, and material evidence documenting the battle for control of Bender. Located on a quiet street below what appeared to be a library, the museum had no other visitors. The museum includes a mix of state symbols such as flags, banners, and slogans juxtaposed alongside material objects of death and destruction. In its presentation and narration, the origins of the tragedy are displaced by particulars, by the individual biographies that underlie the battle as well as situation in Bender today; the museum actively inculcates a sense that the individuals killed did not die in vain.

While the guide began by giving a brief overview of the grassroots efforts of locals to fight the imposition of the Romanian language,²⁰ the museum’s exhibits quickly shifted to biographies of individuals who fought and died for the multi-ethnic Transnistria. By displaying the personal effects of those who fought and died, the museum serves as a material and semiotic repository of Transnistrian sovereignty insofar as it displays the struggle surrounding the *physical embodiment of control*.²¹ It contains numerous indices – objects that serve as guideposts pointing to the state form these individuals died for. Much like the knock on a door points to the presence of someone on the other side, the boots and bullet-ridden jacket of Anatoly Nikolaevich Petrov points to the life that ended on June 19, 1992, a death that may or may not have brought about the subsequent Transnistrian control of Bender. The particular actions of Anatoly are not important insofar as they are overshadowed by the contemporary lived experience and social reality that his death has in the present (its capacity to generate a meaningful realm for habit-formation). In a memorial room there is a presentation of portraits – of faces, with candles marking each anniversary of the tragedy. A ban-

18 The ethnic composition of populations in the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria are nearly identical; thus the framing of the conflict as an “ethnic” one occludes more than it explains. Of Transnistria’s 750,000 inhabitants, 34% are Moldovan, 28% Russian, and 26% Ukrainian (versus 40% Moldovan, 26% Ukrainian, and 25% Russian). Cited in Solonari, Vladimir: *Creating ‘a People’: A Case Study in Post-Soviet History-Writing*, in: *Kritika* (vol. 4), no.2, pp. 414.

19 The battle of Bender occurred on June 19–21, with casualty estimates ranging from a few hundred to nearly a thousand; it is the central battle of the war. See Vahl and Emerson: *Moldova and the Transnistrian Conflict*, in *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 2004, (issue 1). Available online at www.ecmi.de/jemie/download/1-2004Chapter4.pdf.

20 “We are against the Romanianisation of the city of Bendery.” (Мы напотив румынизации город Бендеры)

21 “The traitorous, barbaric, and unprovoked invasion of Bender had a single goal: to frighten and bring to their knees the inhabitants of the Dnestr republic.... However, the people’s bravery, steadfastness, and love of liberty saved the Dnestr republic. The defense of Bender against the overwhelming forces of the enemy closed a heroic page in the history of our young republic. The best sons and daughters of the people sacrificed their lives for peace and liberty in our land.” Babilunga and Bomeshko, *Pagini din istoria plaiului natal* (Pages from the history of the fatherland) (Tiraspol: Transnistrian Institute of Continuing Education, 1997), cited in King, Charles: *The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia’s Unrecognized States*, in: *World Politics*, 2001 (vol. 53), no. 4, pp. 524–552.

ner declares, “They died protecting Bender.”²² The photographs of destruction and death serve as icons of the Transnistrian narrative, likenesses that uncritically transcribe the qualities of the objects, actions, and scenes that they purport to document, namely a Transnistrian victory. While perusing the museum and hearing this narrative, the particulars overshadow the conflict’s origin: we hear of the Cossacks who helped Transnistria, and of the Baltic snipers who aided the nationalist aggressors, but not about the underlying logics of this tragedy – the demise of the Soviet Union and the assistance of the 14th Army.²³ In the museum one finds not the simple invention of tradition but a novel way of physically linking the past to the present, of reducing the manifold to unity.

To dismiss the museum as propaganda misses the point. The uncertainty of origins in the face of a unified presentation of particulars, while perplexing to an outsider, affirms the reality of the state in Bender, legitimate or illegitimate.²⁴ Once again, we see the friend-enemy distinction. “An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity. The enemy is solely the public enemy.”²⁵ While one may see disagreement at the level of fact, at the eschatological level one finds, in its display and its presentation, a degree of coherency.

It was only after going back to Moldova and after visiting a similar museum in Tiraspol that the friend/enemy distinction became clearer. In Chisinau I spoke with a former military officer involved in ceasefire negotiations.²⁶ To my surprise he conveyed the utter impossibility of finding a single view of exactly what happened, even amongst soldiers from the same unit. He likened views of the battle to the divergent accounts surrounding a UFO sighting. Paradoxically, this lack of consensus was not found in ceasefire negotiations. He recalled how hatred was the easiest subject for these “enemies” to get over, and how homemade wine and vodka flowed freely, with both sides reminiscing about the past. Not wishing to project an ethnic component onto the conflict, he mentioned how the fights that led to this battle were of a criminal nature, local vendettas. This confusion points to the fact that Moldovan soldiers could not agree on an ideal or extant truth capable of influencing social action. When I mentioned the museum in Bender, he was intrigued, and he spoke of the lack of offensive operations and of the purely defensive nature of Moldovan engagement. “They have one truth, and the view on 1992 is hard to change.”²⁷

A similar museum exists in Tiraspol, directly across from the Presidential Palace. In this museum one finds a replica of the memorial room in Bender. This time, instead of being on a tour I was with a local. As the museum guide – a stern-looking *babushka* – spoke about the Cossack fighters, Sergei, my informant, gestured when she turned away like a hyperactive child every time she mentioned the Cossacks. His gesticulations implied that they only liked fighting, and that they were, in his own words, crazy. Before moving on, I want to reiterate the materiality of these objects and the particular existential realms that they point to and ideologically symbolise: a Transnistrian “state” that, complimenting or transcending the borders of Moldova, actively exists in the minds of its population. The fact that Sergei mocked the narration in no way implied disbelief about the museum’s narrative content. Generally speaking, in both language and reality the ultimate meaning of a concept is how it influences our actions if we accept it as true, which Sergei did.²⁸ The arbiters of the status quo – namely Russian troops – are conspicuously absent from the Transnistrian version of events. What lurks in the background in Transnistria was the object of scorn among my inter-

22 Они погибли защищая Бендеры.

23 A similar logic of conflict might be found in the Chechen war, where, according to Valery Tishkov, a mythologised history in the face of contemporary political changes came to overshadow the actual origins of the conflict. See Tishkov, Valery: *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*. Berkeley: California, 2004.

24 See Solonari, Vladimir: *Creating ‘a People’: A Case Study in Post-Soviet History-Writing*, in *Kritika* (vol. 4), no.2, pp. 411–448.

25 Schmitt, Carl: *The Concept of the Political*. Chicago: Chicago 1996 [1932], p. 28.

26 Notes from interview with VT in Chisinau, Moldova. August, 2006.

27 Notes from interview with VT in Chisinau, Moldova. August, 2006.

28 This is the basis for pragmatics, a school of philosophy known through authors like Charles Sanders Peirce and J. L. Austin.

locutors in the Moldovan NGO community. Being aware that museums are idealised repositories, I move to another case study that illustrates the relation of the material and the strategic.

Dnestrovsk has the feel of a late Socialist company town, with spotless Soviet monuments and rows of apartment blocks. In the distance looms the massive power plant, Moldova's largest. As I sat on the beach, I was told that someone wished to practice English with me. Upon discovering that Kolya worked at the massive power station in Dnestrovsk, we began discussing the history of the town and how in many ways it resembled American company towns. Kolya told me of the succession of buyers and shell companies that owned the plant after Soviet times. When I inquired about taking a tour, he mentioned that the plant was a strategic asset of Transnistria and that as a US citizen my presence would only cause problems. When I pressed him on his work in a strategic asset of Transnistria, he joked that he lived in a Russian province, and that, working at the station (and having a Russian passport) yielded important material rewards. A mutual acquaintance, upon hearing this, mentioned that she wished to study and to work in Moldova – she saw her future there. This was interesting because she spoke little Romanian (think of the role language played in the conflict). Kolya, who enjoyed the benefits of a well-paid job and access to state structures, had a vested interest in the continued existence of the state, a state that enabled his continued employment; Kolya had connections (*blat*). If one looks at sovereignty not as producing subjectivities but rather the ground for habits that influence social action, one can see how the museums are related to the state relations described above. In the case of the museums, we see a shift away from the didactic Soviet narrative to an instrumental presentation that posits the enemy, not the friend, as the central organising trope of the state. The real or imaginative enemies that these episodes presuppose, be they on the battlefield or at some abstract level, engage a Transnistrian past and future that cannot be viewed along a simple binary axis of inclusion/exclusion, of haves and have-nots, for even individuals marginal to the state feel an affinity to it. Transformation and democratisation offer not an opportunity but rather a fundamental challenge to the terms of politics in Transnistria.

II. Smuggling and the State

Sergei is in his mid-20s. He is married with a child. Trained to manufacture medical products, Sergei works occasionally in construction. As we relaxed on the porch of his apartment in Transnistria's capital, he mentioned how he was without connections. He was fired from his job when the wife of a security officer applied for his position. In so many words, he described the situation in Transnistria as worse than bad, not only economically, but also in terms of crime. Even in his native village, he insisted on accompanying me to the kiosk because he said that unfamiliar faces aroused suspicion – in this small town businesses still needed to pay a roof (*krysha*) for protection. As he said this he gently made a punching motion. Back in the capital, we returned to his apartment late one evening and the discussion turned to the subject of organised crime in Transnistria. As we spoke of the port of Odessa, which I had recently visited, he told me of a hypothetical smuggling situation. The product: not guns or drugs, but ножки Буша – chicken legs.²⁹ According to Sergei, the meat lands in Odessa and then comes to Transnistria. There it receives a Moldovan customs stamp and is shipped across Europe: to Poland, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, etc. I asked him who profited from this illegal trade, and he told me that corrupt officials and businessmen did. In the ensuing discussion of culpability, Sergei informed me that the guilty party was the supplier: the United States. I was perplexed and mentioned that in American it is just business – once you sell, it is out of your hands. He was adamant about this point. While he knew that Transnistria's unique position enabled select individuals to profit from this trade, he could not comprehend Transnistrian complicity. Being eight when Transnistria achieved independence, he had a decade and a half of memories and experiences to draw on, experiences that pointed not to a common autochthonous origin but to an external foe. Furthermore, for Sergei the West in general and American in particular embodied contradictory ideals as the ultimate land of opportunity and purveyor of misery. On the one hand, he endlessly questioned me about the economic possibilities in America, while on the other he blamed American for the turbulent post-Soviet period. Sergei “belonged” to Transnistria

29 Bush Legs were a popular type of food aid provided by the first President Bush during the 1990s.

insofar as it was his place of birth and where he lived, yet he lacked access to the state that would facilitate a life beyond the minimal threshold of existence; in essence he remained outside the purview of the state.

Recognition

In Transnistria the question of recognition is linked to politics and economics. At the individual level, being recognised by and/or having access to an individual with “connections” constitutes an urgent material need for someone like Sergei. This desire for recognition is connected with the prevalence of informal practices – what Derluguian calls the “persistent under-institutionalization of Russian life.”³⁰ This informal realm constitutes an integral component of political power in the post-Soviet sphere. In Transnistria, however, it exists to a unique degree insofar as the existing state of affairs – a façade of a state, internationally unrecognised yet with substantial political and economic support from Russia – is, at the local level, supplemented by networks and practices that commodify “force” at the street level.³¹ In such a situation there is no clear delineation between recognition by authorities and by the individuals inhabiting these zones that compliment or transcend the sovereign state. In Transnistria, the central reality of the post-Soviet period centres on the drastic loss of social power and the massive de-industrialisation that followed. The enthusiasm of perestroika – on both sides of the border people spoke of “freedoms” gained – was overshadowed by the conflict. The shift from production to exchange and even plunder created a pervasive sense of apathy that today anchors Soviet nostalgia. This is the context in which a crude capitalism with a criminal pantina replaced an inefficient but socially valuable planned economy. At the level of politics, indigeneity is a metaphor for an impossible Soviet past; both individuals and authorities deploy it as a political strategy opposed to the West and its desire for the normalisation of Transnistria. The multiethnic Soviet past becomes an exclusionary force in the present, affirming a political centre that is merely a placeholder for inhabitants of a territorial anomaly created in the service of a utopian project that today exists without a referent. Built upon Soviet infrastructure, Transnistria is controlled by individuals who initially served as Soviet *nomenklatura* and later became freedom fighters. These same leaders portray the Russian presence as the guarantor of peace and interethnic harmony in the region, with Russia’s political and economic assistance seen as indispensable for survival.

For Moldova, the stakes could not be higher – already Europe’s poorest country, Transnistria highlights the uncertainty of the state and nation. Failing to participate in both the founding moments of Romanian nationhood and the revolutionary project of the USSR, it has an uncertain genealogy. Moldova gained its statehood under Soviet tutelage but initially ended up denying this insofar as they deemed Moldovan distinctiveness (*vis-à-vis* Romania) to be the result of Soviet desires and not their own.

Conclusion

Among interviews with politicians and intellectuals in Moldova, I consistently heard how the conflict was not internal to Moldova. Often interlocutors reduced the situation to three general approaches: *decriminalization*, *democratization*, and *demilitarization*. While, at the level of policy, these approaches appeared persuasive, they clashed with the existing social reality in Transnistria. Simply stated, people do not choose where they are born, nor what state they live in. Based on my data, these divergent attitudes appear to be the result of different epistemologies that influenced how individuals thought of the state and its functions; norms and the terms of commensuration are always embedded in social and cultural processes.³² On both sides of the Nistru river it appears people have got used to separateness insofar as they display loyalty for their respective political systems; a “solution” to the problem would thus most likely result in neither the

30 Derluguian, Georgi: Under Fond Western Eyes, in: *New Left Review*, 2003 (vol. 24), p. 138.

31 Cf. Volkov, Vadim: *Violent Entrepreneurs: Force and the Making of Russian Capitalism*. Ithaca: Cornell, 2002.

32 Cf. Espeland, Wendy and Mitchell Stevens: Commensuration as a Social Process, in: *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1998 (vol. 24), pp. 313–343.

return of conflict nor a tearful unification. The problem for policy makers and politicians is to seek a resolution based not on rational models and vested interests, but rather one that takes into account those most affected by these events: the people themselves, Moldovan or Transnistrian. As has been the case with numerous state building projects in the former Yugoslavia, we see what problems arise from the conjuncture of strictly delimited political (ethno-territorial) units and of the rhetoric of international “intervention.”

The state in the former USSR must be seen in the larger regional context in which an increasingly flexible and person-centred state form contrasts with a normative and increasingly regulated state that seeks economic integration as a means of cooperation and security (the EU). The practices of post-Soviet political culture, “the black arts of political manipulation and double-speak inherited from the Bolshevik era,” contrast with the normative axis upon which governments in the former USSR are judged according to democratic norms.³³ The Western tendency to declare elections ‘free and fair’ and a state ‘transparent’ assumes a normative and functioning state form. What actually is malleable and heterogeneous – the post-Soviet state and its underlying political culture – is reified as a thing, an object endowed with unchanging and seemingly magical qualities.³⁴

Thus far I have illustrated the ways people in Transnistria speak of statehood and its relation to the social and material world. I have only begun to explore how statehood and sovereignty are mediated through practices, language, knowledge, and habit. While the logic of recognition vis-à-vis the state may or may not be operative in the quotidian, it is always operative with the foreigner, the visitor: the anthropologist.

As Sergei walked me to the bus station, conversation shifted from small talk to the future. Despite his current situation, a paradoxical sense of pride emerged in our conversation. Knowing that I planned to write about my experiences, he was keenly aware on the importance of image management. Having spent the bulk of my visit telling me how bleak life in Transnistria was, he mentioned that I should not write anything bad about Transnistria, otherwise he and his friends would have to “take care of me” when I returned. I found myself wondering how, amidst this struggle to survive materially, he could only think of the image of his home in the eyes of others. And then he asked me how much an immigrant could earn in America.

33 Wilson, Andrew: *Virtual Politics*. New Haven: Yale, 2005, Introduction.

34 Taussig, Michael: *The Magic of the State*. London: Routledge, 1996.