Neopatrimonialism and Beyond: reassessing the formal and informal in the study of Central Asian Politics

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Neopatrimonialism has emerged as the central conceptual label applied by scholars to understand the politics of the Central Asian republics. Like the use of neopatrimonialism in other regional settings, this article argues that the concept has become susceptible to concept misinformation and stretching. Adopting a critical perspective this article highlights three significant problems with the application of neopatrimonialism in the study of Central Asian politics: its appropriateness and operationalisation; the difficulty in ontologically and empirically untangling the formal and informal; and an inherent normativty in its application. While not advocating an abandonment of the concept, the article considers instead how it can be used better in conjunction with additional analytical approaches and/or concepts. The article proffers that a focus on either formal institutional structures; discourses of power; and the concept of 'multiple modernies' would aid our comprehension of the region and resolve the three issues highlighted in this work.

Keywords: neopatrimonialism; Central Asian politics; formal and informal politics; authoritarianism; post-Soviet politics; normativity; multiple modernies; discourses of power.

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Introduction

Scholars have long been aware of the problem of 'concept stretching' or 'concept misinformation' in the social sciences (Sartori 1970). The failure to adequately address the extent to which concepts can travel from one region of empirical investigation to another can lead to what Giovanni Sartori called the 'the line of least resistance' (Sartori 1970: 57). For comparative political scientists this concerns the stretching of the meaning of concepts to account for an ever larger world of study. Precisely unpacking the concepts scholars utilise, particularly in relation to emerging regions of study, is important because 'concepts that are not well-defined lead to confusion and elusive language' (Radaelli 2000: 2). Such conceptual blurring ultimately establishes misunderstanding in the 'ladder of abstraction' obfuscating different levels of the analysis (Sartori 1970: 1043).

This article considers such a case of concept misinformation by examining the ever increasing use of neopatrimonialism in the scholarship of Central Asian politics. The study of post-Soviet Central Asian politics has been underpinned by the social-scientific dichotomy of formal and informal politics (Peyrouse 2012; Laurelle 2012; Schiek and Hensell 2012; Isaacs 2010, 2011; Radnitz 2011; McGlinchey 2011; Fumagalli 2007; Collins 2006; Schatz 2005). Specifically this dichotomy has been operationalised mostly through the concept of neopatrimonialism (Ishiyama 2002; Ilkhamov 2007; Georg Geiss 2012; Franke, Gawrich and Alakbarov 2009). The analytical turn toward the formal-informal binary was as a consequence of the perceived lack of utility and normativity of the democratisation/transitotology frameworks which dominated 1990s scholarship on the former Soviet Union (Carothers 2002; Collins 2006; McGlinchey 2011).[1] However, since then neopatrimonialism has become ubiquitous in the study of the region and is used as shorthand for describing the complex interplay between regimes and elites.

This article critiques the application of neopatrimonialism in the study of Central Asian politics illustrating how its conceptual misuse has led to gaps in our understanding in relation to three specific issues. First, there is a problem with the operationalisation of the concept. Often neopatrimonialism is misapplied to discern regime types, when rather it is better suited to comprehending the nature of authority and legitimation within regimes. At the same time, there has been a tendency to privilege the informal in analytical terms over the formal and this has led to a degree of conceptual and analytical disorder. The relationship between the formal and informal in Central Asia is far more dynamic than currently suggested. While on the surface informal patronage networks, corruption and personal leadership may seem to always supersede and pervade formal institutions; in actuality the hierarchy in the relationship between the two is context dependent. Second, the dynamism and interactivity between the formal and informal complicates the assumed simplified dichotomy. The distinction between the two is not always clear and unambiguous and it is often analytically challenging to observe where the formal ends and the informal begins. Third, there has been an intrinsic normativity in the application of the concept to Central Asia. In particular, implicit in its application is an assumed trajectory towards modernity premised on a liberal-democratic conception of rationality. Consequently, when interpreted in this way the informal component of the concept is understood as deviant and anti-democratic. For example, clan politics, personalist leadership and informal networks of exchange which form the basis of much of the study of Central Asian politics are inferred as barriers to the consolidation of transparent, rule-bound formal institutions which could provide the foundation for democracy in the region. This is problematic as it treats neopatrimonialism as a simple stepping stone towards democracy and thus does not provide an adequate conceptualisation for the varying developmental trajectories open to Central Asian states.

The article does not advocate a complete abandonment of neopatrimonialism. Rather it seeks to suggest how the concept can be better employed. Neopatrimonialism can be used as an overarching category to understand regime legitimation and the forms of authority and political relations which underpin that legitimation (although not necessarily a category to describe regime type), but we should also consider utilising additional analytical pathways to overcome the three problems highlighted in this article. Firstly, a greater focus on the formal institutional side of neopatrimonial authority would alleviate the fixation on the 'informal'. Formal institutions continue to persist and be used by ruling regimes as part of the structuring and legitimation of power in the region. Our fetishisation with the informal in Central Asian politics, and the extent to which the informal pervades the formal, has obscured our understanding of the important role formal institutions can play in supporting neopatrimonial authority. Therefore, there is much to be gained from utilising the insights and scholarly approaches rooted in the 'institutional turn' in comparative authoritarianism (Pepinsky 2013). Secondly, the opacity of the formal-informal dichotomy can be overcome by shifting the analytical focus to the discourses of power which underpin neopatrimonial authority. In other words, we need to observe and explain the discourses which establish the belief (or perceived belief) in the Central Asian leaders and their legitimate right to domination. Rather than attempting to locate where the boundaries between the formal and informal lie, we could unpack the symbolic and discursive mechanisms which aid legitmation of neopatrimonial authority. Moreover, it would allow scholars to introduce the concept of state-society relations into the analysis, as any examination of discursive mechanisms of power also needs to consider the reception and audiences of such discourses. Thirdly, the normativity underpinning the use of neopatrimonialism could be conquered by applying the concept of 'multiple modernities'. The current use of neopatrimonialism in the Central Asian context

does not explain how the regimes reproduce themselves or take on other developmental trajectories whether more democratic or more personalist. Utilising 'multiple modernities' provides the opportunity to remove the shackles of liberal-democratic normativity and recognise the various developmental trajectories open to Central Asian states. However, as will be discussed, in each case these three additional analytical pathways do involve some trade-offs which need to be recognised if they are to be used in conjunction with neopatrimonialism.

This article is in three sections. The first analyses the concept of neopatrimonialism and the development of its use in the study of Central Asian politics. The second provides a critique of the application of neopatrimonialism in Central Asia detailing the three problems highlighted above which have led to concept misinformation in this case. The final section then examines the three alternative analytical pathways/concepts which can be used in conjunction with neopatrimonialism to address each of three problems identified in this work; albeit recognising the limitations of doing so in each instance.

Neopatrimonialism

Neopatrimonialism evolved from Max Weber's ideal-type of patrimonialism, a pre-bureaucratic notion of authority and domination. Within patrimonialism a leader's power is observed as legitimate insofar as it is believed to be founded on tradition (Weber, 1978: 1020). In Weberian logic, patrimonial rule, based on traditional authority, is clearly demarcated from bureaucratic rational legal authority. Norms underpinning patrimonial power 'are not officially written down, nor are they enforced by legal recognition or the power of the modern state' (Grzymala-Busse, 2010: 312-13). Patrimonialism, therefore, became a useful category for analysing traditional societies and power structures (Roth 1968;

Theobald 1982). Neopatrimonialism, however, emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s as a heuristic concept to aid comprehension of the postcolonial transitions occurring in Africa (Lemarchand 1972; Eisenstadt 1973; Bratton and Van de Walle 1994). In neopatrimonialism formal rational-legal forms of authority coexist with patrimonial forms of domination, and the practices inherent to it, (e.g. clientelism, personalism, loyalty, patronage networks) (Bratton and Van de Walle 1994). However, relationships of loyalty and dependence have a tendency to pervade the formal rational-legal political and administrative system (Bratton and Van de Walle 1994: 458). At the heart of neopatrimonialism exists two distinct logics: the private/personal and the public/impersonal (Erdmann and Engel 2007: 105). In this sense the concept allows for an exploration of the interwoven relationship between perceived forms of formal and informal politics. The idea innate to neopatrimonialism is that political power is exercised as a form of private property (Erdmann and Engel 2007: 102), and thus illustrates a blurring of the private and public divide.

While neopatrimonialism was used initially to understand the tension between traditional and bureaucratic authority in postcolonial Africa it became a concept which travelled beyond the boundaries of post-colonial scholarship to Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Southern Europe (Brynen 1995; Mainwaring 1992; Kitschelt H. and Wilkinson 2007; Bechle 2010). The seeming ubiquity of the concept has led to concerns regarding concept misinformation, concept stretching, and the methodological limitations of its use, especially in the case of African politics and development where neopatrimonialism is widely subscribed as a conceptual label (deGrassi 2008; Pitcher, Moran and Johnston, 2009; Bach 2011). This literature provides a survey of the uses and misuses of the concept in different settings, and this article contributes to this emerging body of literature by highlighting how in

the case of Central Asia neopatrimonialism has often been poorly used and how this has important implications for our analysis of the region.

As with other parts of the former Soviet Union, scholars studying the politics of the Central Asian region initially and understandably framed much of their analysis within the democratisation paradigm. The premise of early post-Soviet scholarship was that even if Central Asian states were authoritarian laggards, they were at least on a trajectory towards democracy and contested politics and it was on this basis that we can make assessments and judgements about their political development (Anderson 1995, 1997, 1999; Huskey 1995; Bremmer and Welt 1996; Gleason 1997; Cummings 2003). The concentration of power in the region's presidencies, however, led to a focus on the agency of the Central Asian presidents (Taras 1997; Cummings 2002). The lack of democratic progress also meant scholars focused on the nation-building efforts of political elites (Bohr 1998; Roy 2000). These particular literatures alerted scholars to the questionable utility of the democratisation paradigm given the consolidation of authoritarianism in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, stalled transitions in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and collapse into civil war in Tajikistan. Moreover, the particular characteristics of the agency of presidentialism in Central Asia highlighted the power of informal personalism over formal political institutions, while the process of nation-building began to draw our attention towards the longevity of traditional tribal, clan and religious identities in the region and the extent to which they persisted in spite of Soviet transformation of the region (Fierman 1991; Jones Luong 2004). The consequence of this was a shift in analytical focus to the role and place of informal forms of politics and practices, and how they shaped and undermined formal political institutional development. This was encapsulated in the clan politics literature (Schatz 2005; Collins 2006). It was this tension

between formal and informal politics which drew scholars' attention towards the concept of neopatrimonialism.[2]

In Central Asia, the seeming coexistence of traditional and informal forms of politics (such as personalism, patron-client relations and clan and tribal based politics) with rational-legal formal institutions and rules made neopatrimonialism a seductive concept with which to explore the nature of politics in the region. Initially, the concept was employed as a way to define regime type and to demarcate differences between the regimes in the region (Ishiyama, 2002).[3] The idea that neopatrimonialism represents an ideal type of the form of regime which can be found in the region was soon adopted by many scholars (Ishiyama 2008; Gawrich, Melnkovska and Schweickert 2010; Franke, Gawrich and Alakbarov 2009; McGlinchey 2011; Georg Geiss 2012; Peyrouse 2012; Schiek and Hensell 2012; Lewis, 2012). Largely, the benefit of using the concept was that it overcame the perceived crudeness of a Linzian typology and assisted in explaining how personal informal politics constrains formal decision-making process (Georg Geiss 2012: 188; Collins 2009: 262). As discussed below, employing neopatrimonialism to typologise regimes is a conceptual misuse of the term, as has already been made evident in the case of neopatrimonialism in African studies (Pitcher, Moran and Johnston 2009: 126).

Neopatrimonialism has also been used to unpack regime dynamics where the informal (e.g. patronage networks, corruption, clientelism) is understood to subvert the formal (e.g. government agencies, formal rational-legal rules) (Ilkhamov 2007: 76-77). Here the concept is understood to be correlated and often used as a synonym for patronage networks and politics, and bad governance (Peyrouse 2012; McGlinchey 2011; Gawrich, Melnkovska and Schweickert 2010) and other forms of state-regime dynamics such as the development of

state and bureaucratic structures (George-geiss 2012); political party consolidation and development (Ishiyama 2008); inter-elite consensus (Marat 2012) and the relationship between resource incomes and autocracy (Franke, Gawrich and Alakbarov 2009). Neopatrimonialism's rise to analytical ubiquity in reached a pinnacle with the publication in 2012 of a special issue of *Demokratizatsiya* dedicated to its use in the Central Asian context (Laurelle 2012).

The ways in which neopatrimonialism has been adopted in studies on the region, however, has often led to confusion and obfuscation. Below the article provides a critique of three ways in which the concept of neopatrimonialism has been misinformed or stretched in Central Asian politics. These relate to: the appropriateness and operationalisation of the concept 2) the oversimplification of the formal/informal dichotomy and 3) the inherent normativity in the application of neopatrimonialism

Appropriateness and operationalisation

In terms of appropriateness and operationalisation there are two ways in which neopatrimonialism has been prone to misinformation and stretching. The first relates to the level of analysis at which the concept is applied and the second is the extent to which there is an emphasis on the informal opposed to the formal.

Personalism, and informal politics proscribed in a broad sense, 'manifests itself in different forms and therefore requires approach from different levels of analysis (Guliyev 2011: 575; Helmke and Levitsky 2006: 6-8). In terms of the 'personal' logic there are multiple analytical levels at which the concept can be deployed. For instance, it can be analysed at the level of the state, regime, organisations (networks), practices (corruption) and customs. The problem

is that this multiplicity is not always fully realised and instead what can occur is a degree of conceptual stretching (Guliyev 2011: 576). For instance, using neopatrimonialism to typologise regimes in the region stretches the concept beyond its Weberian origins. Patrimonialism was devised by Max Weber 'as a specific form of authority and source of legitimacy' (Pitcher, Moran and Johnston 2009: 126). Therefore, similar to African Studies, scholars reading Central Asian politics by using neopatrimonialism as way to describe regime type are either conflating the notion of regime with that of authority, or are making an assumed correlation between regime type and authority (Pitcher, Moran and Johnston 2009). It is problematic as neopatrimonialism should relate to how the dominant construct their legitimacy vis-a-vis the dominated. Thus, it is about how such constructions of authority are reciprocated and complied with by society and understood as legitimate (Pitcher, Moran and Johnston 2009: 127). This is something which is often missed when neopatrimonialism is simply used to define the type of regimes in the region and indicates how a lack of accuracy can produce both concept misinformation and conflation within the analysis.

For instance, Alisher Ilkhamov conflates 'clan networks' and 'state corruption'. This establishes a form of conceptual disorder as one is an organisation (clan network) and the other is an informal practice (corruption) (Ilkhamov 2007: 68). Similar conflation occurs in Franke et al (2009:112) where they conflate 'state' and 'regime' within their definition of neopatrimonial. Notwithstanding the inappropriateness of applying neopatrimonialism at the level of regime, as discussed above, the conflation of these two concepts is a typical symptom of the stretching of neopatrimonialism within Central Asian studies. In post-Soviet politics it is difficult to distinguish between the 'state' and 'regime', as the personal authority of a regime can often be contrived as state power, however, it remains important not to treat them as the same within the analysis (Robinson 2008: 3). The problem with conflating the two in

relation to neopatrimonialism is that not distinguishing between a neutral state bureaucracy on the one hand, and the personalised nature of authority and legitimacy on the other, undermines the purpose of the concept. The interaction between the impersonal state and patrimonial authority weakens the operational logic of the concept given it is a heuristic device to analyse the interaction between both the personal and impersonal logics of authority and legitimation.

The second problem related to the appropriateness and operationalisation of neopatrimonialism is the extent to which often the informal is privileged while limited attention is placed on the formal (Ishiyama 2002; Gawrich, Melnkovska and Schweickert 2010; Georg Geiss 2012; Collins 2006; Schatz 2005). In other words it is always important to ask what is the neo in neopatrimonialism? In Franke et al the 'neo' is defined only by the fact that informal networks may not always be formed on family, kinship or a traditional basis (Franke, Gawrich, and Alakbarov 2009: 113). The onus here is on the personal, and in this case the informal networks tied to the renterism of the state and not in any analytical category which concerns impersonal, rational-legal, codified rules. This weighting on the informal is peculiar because it would imply we should just adopt patrimonialism as a concept to study the case of Central Asia (Collins 2009).

However, simply applying patrimonialism is also unsatisfying. There is a reason scholars have been reaching for neopatrimonialism as a conceptual tool and that is because the formal still matters in Central Asia, but the problem is we are not sure how, why or in what way it matters. We know the informal matters (Morris and Polese 2013), yet the formal still remains important in respect to authority and legitimation and scholars acknowledge this explicitly (Ilkhamov 2007: 66). What requires greater attention when using neopatrimonialism in

Central Asia is the dynamic, interchangeable and flexible nature of neopatrimonial authority. It is not simply the case that the informal always prevails (Collins 2006: 11). The formal can take precedence depending on the contingent context. For example, Erica Marat has illustrated how Kurmanbek Bakiyev used his position as Acting President in the aftermath of the 2005 Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan to centralise authority in his person (Marat 2012: 332). Neither the personal or impersonal logic is fixed and the conflicting modes of organisation and their legitimation, and the particular constellation they make up at any given point is dependent upon material conditions and instances of agential political choice (Robinson 2012: 3). In other words the situation between the two logics is dynamic and neopatrimonialism is a far broader system than just narrow regime type or the simplistic reading of the informal personal supplanting the formal impersonal. The relationship between the formal and informal is mutually accommodative and 'can thus be conceptualized as a mutually reinforcing one, as a mutually constitutive cycle of reproduction' (Erdmann and Engel 2007:105). Sequencing, therefore, between the two is dependent on the given context and it is this which needs to be given consideration when employing neopatrimonialism and the particular level of analysis it is aimed at.

Formal-informal dichotomy

Any simple dichotomy between the informal and formal, particularly as conceptualized within neopatrimonialism, is problematic not least because in its operationalisation as a concept it is often difficult to observe where the formal ends and informal begins. Edward Schatz highlights this problem when discussing the relationship between clans and the state. As Schatz argues:

"such strong adherence to Weberian thinking does not equip us to consider syncretic outcomes and the ways in which clans and the state adapt to new environments. If clans and the state begin in fundamental opposition (a hypothetical empirical starting point, not a necessary one), this opposition is not fate. Forms of mutual accommodation can soften the antagonism" (Schatz 2005:233).

To what extent is either political logic (the formal and informal) empirically tangible and differentiated given their constitutive mutualism? An empirical example of accommodation between the formal and informal in Central Asia, and thus a muddying of the conceptual waters, is the role of Nur Otan (Light of Fatherland) in Kazakhstan. Nur Otan is President Nazarbayev's political party and it has dominated the party system since its conception originally in 1999 as Otan (Isaacs 2011:80-82). The usual barometer of defining formal institutions is their embodiment of impersonalised rationalism, but in the case of Kazakhstan it is clear that while on the surface the party is a formal institution, underneath its operation and political success is defined by the personalised power of the president. Nur Otan has no ideology or policy agenda separate from that set out by the president in his annual address and the party is effectively a personalist dominant party (Isaacs and Whitmore 2013). The party is privy to extensive state and administrative resources, including but not limited to, vast human resources and patronage networks available to local *Akims* (governors).

The underlying personalism of the party, and the patronage network's which sustain its dominance illustrate what we might typically understand as the informal pervading the formal sphere. Yet, it is not as straightforward as that. For instance, in 2007, the constitution was altered lifting the bar on senior state employers becoming members of political parties. Local *Akims* joined Nur Otan *en masse* and consequently combined their position as regional

governors with that of the head of the regional branch of the party. Here it is ontologically difficult to see a distinction between the formal and informal. Their state-led position as governor is fused with their position as head of the party branch, and the state post provides them with an opportunity to benefit the party in terms of membership mobilisation and the ability to distribute rents, jobs and other resources to their clientelist networks. It is genuinely challenging to observe empirically where the formal ends and the informal begins. Does their ability to distribute resources depend on their occupation of rationally-legally defined offices of state? Or does it depend on their personal position with Nur Otan? Or is their power based not on either form of office, but instead simply on their personal position within the political elite which has been developed over years of networking and clientelism? However, how can they cultivate such networks which underpin their power without access to rationally-defined offices of state which empowers them with the resources and opportunity to allocate rents to loyal clients? The answer to these questions is that probably all of the different formal and informal positions and offices play a role. This only highlights, however, the difficulty in operationalising the formal/informal dichotomy in the Central Asian context. While this is evidence of the blurring of the public and private spheres encapsulated by neopatrimonialism, it does not make it easy to empirically observe how the formal and informal operates in this context.

Much of the scholarship on Central Asian politics takes the distinction between the formal and informal as a given. Yet, given the constitutively accommodative nature of such forms of political relations, it is often hard to locate whether domination occurs in a formal legal-rationally bounded office, or through informal patrimonial means. As discussed below, rather than analytically being concerned whether authority lay within boundaries of either the

formal or informal logic of neopatrimonial domination, it is perhaps better, given the concept is concerned with legitimation, to try and unpack the discourses with underpin that authority.

Normativity

A further issue related to utilising neopatrimonialism in analysing Central Asian politics is the implicit normativity underpinning its application. Despite the recognition from scholars that utilising theories of democratisation to understand post-Soviet Central Asia were inadequate, how neopatrimonialism has been utilised remains equally problematic (Collins 2006). Often the assumption in using neopatrimonialism, is that states *should* be, and *are*, on a trajectory towards a Weberian conception of modernity. In other words, states (and regimes) should possess a form of domination which is bounded by the 'belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands' (Weber 1978: 212). The use of neopatrimonialism in Central Asia informs us of the coexistence of formality and informality in the legitimation of authority, but how it has been applied suggests a half-way house in which vestiges of traditional authority, and its constituent elements (clientelism, patronage etc), are perceived to possess anti-democratic properties and act as a break on democratic governance. Georg Geiss, for instance, argues that political liberalisation can only be achieved in Central Asia if bureaucratic-developmental state structures 'can be strengthened in order to overcome neopatrimonialism' (Georg Geiss 2012: 197). Therefore, neopatrimonialism is being used to frame analysis of the Central Asian states within an idealised democratic paradigm. For instance, John Ishiyama evokes neopatrimonialism in relation to the impact of regime type on potential transition paths to democracy (Ishiyama 2002). Gawrich et al proffer neopatrimonialism as an explanation for bad governance suggesting that strong personal leadership and its associated clientelism explains the deviation from 'the normal pattern in terms of institutional quality'

(Gawrich, Melnykovska, and Schweickert 2010: 21). While such declarations are not controversial, indeed they are undoubtedly correct, it does undermine the rationale of using neopatrimonialism as a step away from frameworks which are rooted in understanding Central Asia on the premise of a trajectory towards democracy. Additionally, a Weberian conceptualisation of the formal and informal in post-Soviet Central Asian politics lends itself to inherently depicting the informal as 'anti-democratic' and pre-modern. This is perhaps mostly observed in the clan politics literature where informal clan networks display a tendency to undermine democracy (Starr 2006: 6-7; Collins 2006). The perceived dominance of clans and their pervasiveness over formal institutions inhibits pluralism and participatory politics (Collins 2006: 53). Informal politics, from this perspective, through the agency of actual and fictive kinship based networks are imbued with antidemocratic properties.[4]

These normative assumptions are problematic as they implicitly suggest Central Asia as an 'other' which needs to conform to the norms of established liberal democracies. Using a patrimonial/neopatrimonial paradigm continues to implicitly judge these countries against some preconceived ideal (rational-legal authority), and deviations from this ideal, usually driven by some form of informal patrimonial politics, undermines these states' trajectory towards a democratic impersonalised ideal. Subsequently, we do not analyse the Central Asian polities on their own terms. The use of neopatrimonialism in this context does not adequately conceptualise developmental possibilities for the Central Asian states. If we want to understand the broader developmental trajectories in political systems which are underpinned by legitimation rooted in both traditional and legal-rational authority then the concept of neopatrimonialism requires co-joining with an additional concept which recognises the multiplicities of potential trajectories. As argued below, the concept of 'multiple modernities' might well be enlightening in this instance.

Alternative Analytical Pathways

The three issues highlighted above demonstrate the way in which neopatrimonialism has been susceptible to concept misinformation and/or concept stretching in its application to the Central Asian region. The point to emphasise here is not that neopatrimonialism should be abandoned in the study of Central Asian politics, rather that we should use it appropriately. If we return to Weber's original intentions with the concept of patrimonialism, which was an ideal-type which pertained to a form of domination legitimated by virtue of traditional political relations, behaviour and beliefs, then at the general level neopatrimonialism concerns a form of legitimation where there is both a belief in the right to dominate through enacted legal rules and through belief in the age-old sanctions of tradition. The problem with its application in Central Asia (as has been the case in other regional settings) is that the principle purpose of the concept is lost. The remainder of this article provides a discussion on potential additional approaches to be co-joined with the concept of neopatrimonialism for the purpose of studying Central Asian politics. Each alternative conceptual approach is targeted at overcoming each one of the problems with the employment of neopatrimonialism highlighted earlier, although in each instance the trade-offs with adopting each approach is equally recognised.

Formal Institutional

As mentioned above, the application of neopatrimonialism in Central Asian studies has led to an overemphasis on the informal logic of the concept. Nonetheless, its continued use, and that Central Asian leaderships persist in using formal institutions, whether political parties, legislatures, or the routinization of their informal personal power through frequent constitutional changes, suggests that the formal is important, even if we are not sure why or

how. Therefore, given the attention on the informal logic of neopatrimonialism, scholars could instead provide greater equity within the analysis and 'bring the formal back in'. Neopatrimonialism should be deployed as a concept which explores the dynamic relationship between both formal and informal elements of political systems underpinned by a neopatrimonial logic of legitimation. What is the role and place of formal institutions vis-a-vis the informal, patronage-driven personalistic aspects of political relations and behaviour? How are formal institutions used to structure patrimonial relations? And how might they act to legitimate such traditional informal relations and behaviour? Naturally it would be problematic to take a conventional approach to the study of formal institutions in Central Asia. Taking Central Asian parliaments, judiciaries, political parties, elections and constitutions at face value, and attempting to unpack their role in structuring political behaviour, providing oversight of the executive and in shaping policy outcomes, is unlikely to be a fruitful exercise given the extent to which such bodies are believed to be staffed with loyal functionaries of the region's presidents. Nonetheless, there is much to be gained by a closer focus on how formal institutions have a role in providing institutional support and legitimation to the different authoritarian regimes in the region.

The recent 'institutional turn' in comparative authoritarianism could prove instructive in the case of Central Asia, exploring as it does how institutions act to contain elite factionalism and mobilise popular support for authoritarian rule (Pepinsky 2013; Magaloni and Kricheli 2010; Ghandi 2008). For instance, Nur Otan, as a formal institution, provided a mechanism through which Nazarbayev was able to contain and formally structure patrimonial elite competition. In the five years preceding the creation of Nur Otan in 2006 the Nazarbayev regime had been battered by waves of elite fragmentation, with senior officials leaving the confines of the leader's inner and outer circles and publically challenging his authority (Chebotarev, 2006).

At the same time, patrimonial elite groups loyal to Nazarbayev also had their own political organisations, such as *Asar* (Together), Dariga Nazarbyaeva and Rakhat Aliev's party, and the Civic Party of Kazakhstan, the political front for Aleksandr Maskevich's Eurasian National Resources Corporation. The 2004 parliamentary election was perhaps the most competitively fought in Kazakhstan's post-Soviet history, and the merger of Asar and the Civic Party with Otan to create Nur Otan in 2006 was partially a policy response to solve the factional instability of patrimonial politics and consolidate political support behind Nazarbayev, while using tough legislation around parties and elections to marginalise oppositional forces (Isaacs 2011: 91-103). In analytical terms the purpose is to use neopatrimonialism to understand how power is legitimated in a given political system. The concept can then by disaggregated by exploring the linkages, interaction and mutually constitutive nature between the formal 'public' logic (in this case a political party) and the informal 'private' logic (in this case patrimonial factional elite politics). In this instance, Nur Otan acts to structure the informality of patrimonial competition, a form of politics upon which Nazarbyaev's domination is legitimated because of his position as arbiter of such competition.

By applying neopatrimonialism is this way it overcomes the inevitable slide towards concentrating on the informal (at the expense of the formal), albeit without removing the notion of informal forms of political relations and behaviour from the analysis. For example, many studies within the 'institutional turn', while not explicitly adopting neopatrimonialism have analysed how the loyalty of elite factions are brought through the distribution of resources and patronage in an effort to sure up the incumbent authoritarian leader's dominance (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). The advantage of a re-orientation on the formal within neopatrimonialism is that it allows scholars to draw attention to questions of political

power and elite-led mobilisation and in particular how institutions serve to allow regimes to reproduce themselves over time.

Despite the advantages of adopting a formal-institutional approach there are two trade-offs which have to be taken into account. Firstly, a formal institutional approach (as found in studies of comparative authoritarianism) tends to ignore informal institutions and practices and the interaction between formal and informal politics. Therefore, concentrating on the formal should not come at the expense of the informal. Secondly, re-focusing on the formal does not overcome the issue of trying to ascertain where empirically the formal-informal lay in Central Asian politics. That the two logics are mutually constituted can make empirically identifying their role and place within this interaction challenging, and a stress within the application of neopatrimonialism on one of the particular logics does not resolve this issue.

Discourse of Power

One way in which it would be possible overcome the opacity of the formal/informal dichotomy would be to focus less on where power lies (whether formal or informal); and instead return to the issue of legitimation. Therefore we can accept that domination in Central Asia is legitimated through both informal and forms, without being concerned with a rigid dichotomy between the formal and informal where often it is not clear how to both ontologically or empirically untangle. The point, however, is to instead unpack how the belief in neopatrimonial authority is conditioned. What are the mechanisms through which a bond between ruler and ruled in Central Asia is established? In Central Asia this could be most observable through an examination of the rhetorical, symbolic and ideological methods and mechanisms through which domination is constructed, interpreted and understood

(Cummings, 2009). How have the leaders in Central Asia constructed the discourse of their domination, and how is it interpreted and given meaning by elites and the wider population? Scholars have already begun to examine how leaderships in the region sought to create internal ideological signification in order to establish certainty and stability in the aftermath of Soviet collapse (Cummings 2009: 1083-84). The use of symbolism and discourse is in ample evidence whether it is the attempts to establish charismatic authority through the ubiquitous presidential portraits hanging in every public building, mass spectacles or broad discourses and narratives regarding presidential leadership all play some role in the configuration of power and domination (Adams and Rustemova 2009).

Many of the discourses perpetuated by ruling elites in Central Asia have played out as an ideological shift from communism to nationalism – much of which draws on a reinterpretation of historical memory and tradition. For example, in Kazakhstan this can be viewed in the attempts of the government to pitch Nazarbayev and the modern Kazakh nation-state as being a direct descendent of the Kazakh Khanate of the 17th Century and drawing on a reinterpretation of Kazakh history in order to offer a foundation myth for the Nation. Often, however, the discourse of legitimation is rooted in the personalistic nature of the leadership. The special and unique qualities of the leader are emphasised along with their proclivity to deliver state security and prosperity. This is especially the case with Islam Karimov and Nursultan Nazarbayev in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan respectively (Matveeva, 2009: 1109; Rubezhom, 2009). What this draws our attention to are the different discourses which maintain the domination of incumbent regimes, the narratives, symbols and meanings which are driving post-Soviet state development and the extent to which they could be contested at the local level (Polese 2011).

A shift towards discursive analysis would have two principle benefits. It would return our understanding of the notion of neopatrimonialism (or places where we believe neopatrimonialism to exist) back towards a traditional Weberian interpretation of the concept which is concerned with the ways in which authority is legitimated. In other words, it enables a focus on the relations between the ruler and the ruled. Secondly, as a consequence of the first, it would allow scholars to bring state/regime-society relations to the fore of the analysis of Central Asian politics. If we are able to observe or explain the extent to which such discursive practices resonate or shape belief in the legitimacy of the region's leaders, and their domination underpinned by both formal and informal logics, then we have the opportunity to address issues of social change, and eventual processes of political development. This is not necessarily about making predictions regarding the extent to which society may mobilise either against or on behalf of the regime; rather it concerns bringing Central Asian society back into our analysis of the political. It is so we can understand aspects of social change vis-à-vis the dominance of the personal power of the presidents in the region.

The trade off of such an approach is that there is no specific mechanism through which to operationalise neopatrimonialism as a concept. A neopatrimonial state of relations between the ruler and the ruled is taken as a given and there would be no attempt to explore the mutually constitute dynamic between formal and informal politics. Alternatively, the emphasis centres on how the belief in neopatrimonial authority is understood to be legitimate through various symbolic and discursive mechanisms. Secondly, conducting research in Central Asia which focuses on citizens' beliefs in the legitimacy of the ruler and how they understand and interpret the discourses of power is challenging. The authoritarian

environment is such that individuals often practice a form of self-censorship when discussing such sensitive political issues.

Multiple Modernities

While neopatrimonialism may have initially possessed conceptual value in shifting emphasis from the democratisation paradigm, the application of neopatrimonialism to the case of Central Asia has tended to stress how the informal acts as a break on democratic development. This underlying normativity continues to create an idealised expectation regarding Central Asian political development. It creates a problem whereby there is a failure to recognise the various development paths upon which political systems with an inherent combination of both the traditional and legal-rational legitimation can tread. Moreover, it does not allow us to adequately conceptualise the ways in which Central Asian elites and societies construct, interpret and understand their own political, social and economic development. The post-Soviet experience of Central Asia suggests it is on a path to some other version of modernity not just rooted in the liberal-democratic experience of rational-legal authority. Therefore, persistently setting Central Asian political development in the context of democratisation by underscoring how the informal personalised aspects of neopatrimonialism undermines the legal-rational, fails to capture developmental possibilities for the five states. One of the earliest applications of the concept in the case of Central Asia by John Ishiyama (2002) did attempt to recognise political diversity in the region by illustrating how neopatrimonialism could be used to differentiate the different regime types. However, as discussed above, neopatrimonialism is not a regime type. Therefore, while we can continue to use neopatrimonialism to unpack and analyse the way in which authority in the region is legitimated we require an additional concept to comprehend broader developmental issues.

A useful concept to adopt in this instance is multiple modernities. 'Multiple modernities' is rooted in the idea that traditional theories of convergence assume a unified, homogenised and inevitable process underlying state development and that alternatively what we need to appreciate instead is the differing trajectories of political and social development (Eisenstadt 2003; Wagner 2010; Fourie 2012: 52-54). Such a notion is pertinent to the study of Central Asian development as it allows us to recognise the various developmental paths open to states where authority is legitimated by both formal and informal forms of political behaviour and relations. Neopatrimonialism does not preclude states developing to something other than democracy. We clearly know that the Central Asian states are not following a path towards the Westernised norm of modernity, and the application of Weberian influenced concepts such as neopatrimonialism is still hindered by a normative bias whereby often it is often assumed these states should be on a trajectory from traditionalism to legal-rational modernity. Adopting a multiple modernities approach could be far more illuminating and afford scholars the opportunity to see Central Asia less as the deviant norm-defying 'other', but instead accepting the region on its own terms. It is in many ways about observing Central Asian states and elites as constructing their own response to overarching social and economic forces. In other words, it is about tackling how Central Asian elites and societies possess their own agency and rationalism vis-à-vis modernity.

A good example of how 'multiple modernities' can be a useful device in this instance is through examining how Central Asian elites often depict state development as unique and particular to the historical and cultural experience of their countries. There is a concrete effort to set Central Asian development apart from trends in the West. For example, 'Kazakhstan's path to democracy' or the 'Uzbek way' posits a culturally specific form of democracy in

which primacy is placed on state security, sovereignty, a belief in economic reform prior to any political reform, a stable and gradual path to democracy, and the benefits of personal leadership (Prikaspiikaya Kommuna 2013). External efforts of norm diffusion through bodies such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) are often viewed as the attempt to impose Western values on the region which do not necessarily fit the particular historical and cultural mentalities of Central Asians (Associated Press 2012). What it illustrates is how Central Asian elites construct their own interpretation of their political development vis-à-vis broader global efforts of democratic norm conformity. In doing so they seek to differentiate and make their political development distinct from such wider structural forces.

Such Central Asian interpretations of modernity and state development are typically understood in very instrumental terms by scholars. Presenting their failure to conform to international normative standards of democratisation and human rights as a specific tailor-made form of democracy is often understood as façade attempts to justify and legitimise their authoritarian rule – and to ward off Western criticism. These types of conclusions are understandable, and no doubt valid. One trade-off of adopting a pluralist conception of modernity in order to understand varied developmental paths is that it falls into the position of justifying these 'unique' models of development. This could lead to the researcher legitimising the practice of more or less abhorrent governing tactics which exclude and marginalise opposition and dissident politics. Thus in attempting to step away from using neopatrimonialism to understanding broader political development because of the tendency to slide into normativity, adopting 'multiple modernities' as a way to conceptualise the potential for diverse and multiple transition paths could also fell prey to a lack of normative neutrality. Therefore, any application of 'multiple modernities' requires as much care and attention as

that of neopatrimonialism. Nonetheless, understanding what Central Asian modernity is, how it is constructed and interpreted by regimes, elites and peoples is central to furthering our grasp of broader political, social and economic development in the region. Overcoming the normative challenge is possible if scholars avoid a degree of cultural and historical determinism and keep a clear analytical distance from the subject and understand Central Asian specific modernity and development as in a constant process of constitution and re-constitution with the dominant global hegemonic ideologies of liberal democracy and capitalism.

Conclusion

A strict Weberian interpretation of neopatrimonialism is that the concept concerns the mutual co-existence of informal and formal rules and behaviour which are perceived to provide legitimacy for the dominant to dominate in any given power relationship. In this sense the concept is not suited to defining types of regimes, but rather understanding the behaviour and relations which underpin and legitimate a regime's authority. The misuse of neopatrimonialism in the case of Central Asia beyond the confines of its Weberian roots has led, to; analytical disorder (as the concept is applied at all kinds of analytical levels); an emphasis on the informal over the formal (even though it is a concept for analysing the interaction between the two); an ontological and empirical opacity between the boundaries of the formal and informal; and an inherent normatitivty in the way it is applied which suggests Central Asia should conform to an idealised conception of liberal democracy.

These forms of conceptual misinformation impinge on our ability to discuss and better understand Central Asian political development. Often we do not know how exactly the formal and informal interact and mutually constitute one another because of the tendency to

understand neopatrimonialism as principally being concerned with how the informal distorts formal political development through patronage, loyalty and the pervasiveness of corrupt practices. The expectation that Central Asian states should reach the impersonalised ideal of liberal democracy also hinders our ability to understand the multiple forms of development available to the former Soviet republics. Therefore, neopatrimonialism requires more careful application and should not be continuously adopted as a label which in and of itself explains the complex politics of the region. We should use neopatrimonialism as a way to discern how regimes derive their authority through both the traditional and legal-rational – and how both the formal and informal act to mutually constitute one another. Therefore, if we choose to apply neopatrimonialism we need to do so at a particular level of analysis pertinent to regime legitimation taking account of both the formal and informal. An example of this is how patronage politics (the traditional-informal level of analysis) operates in relation to party politics (the formal) and how their mutual dynamism plays a role in legitimating the authority of the regime. Additionally, to overcome each of the three problems identified in this article we can choose to adopt additional analytical tools and concepts. The three outlined here (a greater emphasis on formal institutions to overcome the predisposition to the informal; a turn towards discourses of power as way to address the opacity of the formal informal dichotomy; and the adoption of the 'multiple modernities' concept in order to address issues of normativity) do not come without problems as highlighted in the above analysis. Nonetheless, they do offer us a varied set of lenses to re-focus and re-tune our analysis of Central Asian political development. They do offer a solution to some of the problems caused by the stretching and misuse of neopatrimonialism. Moreover, if used alongside neopatrimonialism we can continue to get the best out this Weberian concept while also expanding our conceptual toolkit for studies on the region's politics.

There is precariousness to any critical investigation into conceptual misinformation. This article is no different. In examining the misuse of neopatrimonialism in Central Asia the author is opening up themselves to challenge and scrutiny and there are no doubt pitfalls in some of the proposed analytical pathways proposed in this paper (which the author hopes at least some have been tentatively addressed). Nonetheless, the purpose of this discussion is above all to open up the debate and to challenge our assumptions about how we study, analyse and think about Central Asia and beyond. In doing so the hope is that other scholars will take up the baton and either find their own response to the criticisms herein or run with some of the potential analytical pathways set out here in this contribution.

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[1] Here are I am referring specifically here to the modernisation (or preconditions) and genetic (or transitions) schools of thought which both sought to explain the emergence of democracy.

[2] Our conceptualisation of the notions of the formal and informal are mostly rooted in a Weberian understanding of the terms. That is the formal exists as rational-legal forms of authority with clear demarcations between the "private" and "official" domains alongside a commitment to impersonal relations. The informal relates to traditional and charismatic forms of authority and their inherent personalism, irrationalism, and lack of assurance to impersonal codified rules as the basis of a normative political and social order. The private/public and personal/impersonal dichotomies are not synonyms for formal/informal. The private/public dichotomy relates to whether interests associated with a particular political position are based on private or public concerns. The personal/impersonal dichotomy is associated with the extent to which power relations between actors are based on a personal or impersonal basis. The formal/informal dichotomy acts as a general category in which to place these sub-dichotomies. In addition, informal politics is understood and used in this article as a comprehensive term which encompasses all forms of political behaviour, relations and rules which exist outside of officially sanctioned channels. Informal politics as a term takes under its umbrella informal institutions, organisations, and practices. Such forms of informal politics then tend to produce different types of informal behaviour such as corruption and patronage. As suggested by Lauth 'Informal politics include different variations of action, which do not necessarily have to be linked to institutions. Informal actions can either be based on rules or they can have spontaneous or erratic character' (Lauth 2004: 73).

[3] John Ishiyama (2002: 51-53) used Bratton and Van De Walle's (1994) four-part neopatrimonial regime typology (personal dictatorship, military oligarchy, plebiscitary and competitive one-party) to argue that Turkmenistan corresponded to a personalist dictatorship form of neopatrimonialism, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as competitive single-party neopatrimonial regimes, Uzbekistan a plebiscitary single-party neopatrimonial model and Tajikistan a oligarchic neopatrimonial regime

[4] At the same time, however, Collins also suggests that clan politics can create instability for authoritarian as well as democratic systems.