Kant in the Steppes: Pastoralist and the Kantian Imperative

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"Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." (Kant 1785). The Kantian imperative is frequently considered a fundamental rule for establishing an ethic founded on the abstinence of encroaching on someone else's rights and necessities. According to this, in an ideal world people establish rules that acknowledge each other's needs, and once they exist, following those guidelines becomes an aim in itself that creates and maintains social order.

Nomads of different kinds, pastoralists as well as peripatetic groups, have for long been conceptualized as the antipode to such a normative model. They lead lives lacking clear societal regulations as free-roamers who pursue their individual needs, not shying away from the use of violence if deemed advantageous. One consequence seems to be the failure to develop clearly defined property rights on land, resulting in a "tragedy of the commons" (Hardin 1968), so often – and in most cases wrongly – associated with pastoral lifestyles.

Obviously, the pursue of individual self-interest to the detriment of others is by no means a monopoly of nomadic societies. But, indeed, in many pastoral areas of the world, decision-making on economic and social issues is highly individualized and determined by the need for maximum flexibility. This does not occur without respect for

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established institutional arrangements, but these tend to be volatile and may readily be transgressed when the survival of one's herd is at stake.

Building on ethnographic research in Western Mongolia, this paper stresses the fundamental need for such individualized decision-making and the generosity with which people grant each other the right to trespass. No severe measures will be taken as long as such a move does not pose an imminent threat to oneself. In turning Kant upside down, one might formulate an alternative imperative that grants everyone else the freedom and flexibility s*he needs as long as this does not endanger one's survival as a pastoralist household.

One example for that is the attitudes towards people maximising their herds. Obviously, this is against the interests of others, reflected in a common saying. "They eat up our collective pastures without much of a benefit even for the guy himself. He doesn't have enough manpower to milk all his animals anyway." Such complaints, however, do not produce punitive actions or ostracising tendencies of any kind. Also, livestock theft (which does exist) is not conceptualised or practiced as a mean to equalise wealth differences. In principle, it is considered people's right to own as many livestock as they are able to. And as luck comes and goes, one day it may be me to be the rich guy who will then claim the same privileges.

Closely related with this is the issue of access to pastures. Allocation rules in Western Mongolia are quite complex and entail a seasonal time margin when to use particular areas with a first-come, first-served right to individual spots. However, due to annual weather conditions and the need to adapt to changing patterns of livestock management there is always a temptation to trespass, thereby infringing on pastures in need for other households during other parts of the year. In years with sufficient vegetation, nobody will take serious offence in that, knowing that the same may happen to oneself at a different point in time. By contrast, in times of scarcity such an assault on the well-being of one's herd may provoke vigorous opposition and, eventually, violent encounters.

Regarding trade, the situation is similar in the sense that most people prefer to market their products themselves. Trust in others is remarkably low, in spite of the generally agreed-upon benefits this would create. No efforts to create grass-root organisations to make up for the breakdown of official trade channels were successful in the areas under question. Equally, coordinating economic activities is comparatively little developed and

the general attitude more one of competition than cooperation. At the same time, for pastoralists in remote areas to consign their agricultural or livestock products to a relative or friend residing in the regional settlement is unavoidable. There is little for him then to control for the share withheld or, more generally, the likelihood of being taken advantage. But, as in the other examples, this would cause serious frictions only when the damage is beyond what people deem as existential.

In sum, the Kantian imperative seems less valid in the Mongolian steppes than in densely populated parts of the world, which ground on a complicated division of labour and transactions with anonymous strangers. Rules and societal guidelines here are crafted for a particular purpose – as they are, of course, in any place in the world. But they do not, to the same degree, develop a life of their own that unfolds for the sake of adhering to them. They are also not strongly backed-up by social or cultural mechanisms, such as kinship mobilisation or religious norms of conduct. On the contrary, most importantly, people are – if there is no good reason to the contrary – conceded the right for trespassing if there appears to be a legitimate cause for that. It is only when one's livelihood deems to be threatened that misbehaviour will be seriously challenged and, eventually, penalised. As long as this is not the case, it is generosity and the granting of needed flexibility that are major moral guidelines that structure social interaction in the steppes.