Control and subversion: gender, Islam, and socialism in Tajikistan
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SUMMARY

Control and Subversion: Gender, Islam and Socialism in Tajikistan

The present study is set in the Muslim, former Soviet, Central-Asian Republic of Tajikistan. The poorest of the fifteen Union republics, with a rich cultural history but for centuries largely isolated from the world outside the region, Tajikistan suffered a violent civil war in 1992-93 from which it has not yet fully recovered, and which has left it in a state of ongoing everyday violence.

This study tells the stories of a group of Tajik men and women, girls and boys. It describes the social conventions and constraints that have affected their lives within the Tajik community during and since the Soviet period, what this has meant for them, and how they have reacted. In effect it is about the workings of social control within a Muslim colony ruled by eurocentric socialist masters. I examine control at all levels of society, from the state through the wider community and the family down to the marriage bed. This control, however, does not go unresisted, for subversion is present at every level.

My original impulse to study Tajikistan came from my interest in examining what the socialist Soviet state had managed to achieve for Muslim women. However, in the end, this took a back seat and ended up very much as a subtext in my work. The impetus for the change of direction came from the young Tajik women I was getting to know, who showed me that a far more influential place in their lives was played by the constraints their families and their community forced them to live under. Moreover, after closer acquaintance with one young man, whose history showed that sons can find themselves almost as strongly controlled as daughters, I broadened my study to include males also.

The first part of the study sets the scene. It gives the historical and social background, outlines the book’s methodological and conceptual basis, and explains my theoretical approach, based largely on the work of Foucault and Butler. I make use of the former’s notions of the circularity of power and the inevitable resistance to it, as well as of the importance of carrying out social analyses starting at the bottom and working up, using the micro-mechanisms of power that function at community level (Foucault 1980a, 1990). Butler’s work on gender performativity \(^1\) (cf. Butler 1990; 1993, 1995b: 134) and the formation of human identity through subjugation to social norms (Butler 1997b) helped me conceptualise the micro-level phenomena of Tajik society, at the level of individual psychology.

However, finding Butler’s theory of performativity did not go far enough to explain certain aspects of gender performance that I had observed in Tajikistan, I invented the concept of variant gender performances. This is the way Tajiks, especially the subordinate members of society, females of all ages and young males, modify their gender performances in order to conform to the varied expectations of their audiences. These variant performances are enabled by the use of ‘gender masks’, that allow subordinates to appear as stock characters in order to hide their insubordination from the dominant. Masks can also be assumed by the dominant to hide their weaknesses from the subordinate. This concept of masks has been adapted from

\(^1\) Performativity is taken from speech act theory (Butler 1993: 13). In the present context its meaning is that internalising gender identities is insufficient. In order for them to become meaningful they must also be performed, or enacted, projected to the outside world.
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Scott (1990: 3-4), and is further influenced by the work of Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994a, 1994b), among others.

The discussion of Tajik society begins with an examination of the relations between the Tajik people and the Soviet state. In the 1920's and early 1930's the Bolsheviks endeavoured to penetrate Tajik culture and modernise it, chiefly by forcing its women out of seclusion, and insisting on their abandoning the veil that had been a vital part of their feminine identity. As this was viewed by the men as an attack on their masculine identity there was strong resistance. The result was not only a large number of dead and wounded but also the rigidifying of Tajik social norms, particularly gender identities, that ended up serving as a strong barrier to Soviet cultural penetration. Both the Soviet regime and the Tajik people found gender norms to be the most important facet of cultural identity to be attacked, or conversely, preserved. In fact the Tajik people were able to subvert the might of the Soviet state by their refusal to make significant changes to their gender norms.

The next part of my study focuses on relations within the Tajik community, on the family, the individual, and the marital relationship. It covers the last years of the Soviet period and the post-Soviet period up to the end of the twentieth century. The chief organising principle of Tajik society is shown not to be Islam but rather the originally Mediterranean honour-and-shame system. The most important effects of this system on Tajik society have been to produce a dominant set of very narrow gender norms. The essential masculine characteristics are male control made possible by female submission, and virility enabled by female virginity, fertility, and chastity. However, the honour-and-shame system is not just about male domination of females. The male conceptualised here is a head of family to whom all the members are supposed to show obedience. Moreover, women are also able to exact obedience from their (adult) offspring of both sexes. The result is that, the discourse notwithstanding, older women are allowed to be controlling and younger men supposed to be submissive. The community forces its members to adhere to the norms of the honour-and-shame system by the use of a number of micro-mechanisms of power, including spying, gossiping, tale-bearing.

Parental control over children is extremely important for maintaining the norms. The single most important strategy for maintaining Tajik cultural identity is, in most families insistence on the parents' right to select their children's spouse, or for the more relaxed minority, the imposition of a rigid set of conditions to be met by any prospective spouse. Parents choose a spouse for their children not based on the likelihood of the mutual compatibility of the young couple but in order to gain the right sort of daughter-in-law for their needs. Some young people, who have fallen in love with an unsuitable candidate, try to rebel, but most youngsters accept their parents' choice and many thereby find themselves in unhappy marriages. Nevertheless, a minority manages to subvert the norms and choose for themselves, always provided their family situation facilitates this and they keep within the range of appropriate candidates. Thus, despite the pressure for all to conform to the same rather narrow norms some scope for difference exists.

Beneath the gender masks young people have dreams and longings they cannot express to anyone in their family. All the same they may try to manipulate their family circumstances to give themselves more space for making their own life decisions within the rigid gender norms they are obliged to enact. But some young women are faced with serious problems, such as physical handicaps, rape, and infertility. Any of these may render them
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unmarriageable and thus social outcasts. For both males and females suicides tend to be related to the pressures of preserving gender norms. In fact, it is not only women who have problems; it is not always easy to be a man in Tajikistan.

The marital relation can bring with it many complications. Although the great majority of Tajik marriages are arranged, love matches do sometimes take place. Both types of marriage have their pros and cons. Provided a person has not been made to abandon a beloved and forced into marriage against their will, arranged marriages can be as happy as love matches. Domestic violence is possible in either type of marriage and is partly due to masculine insecurity and partly to the post-war situation. The most important condition for marital happiness is the willingness and/or ability of spouses to abandon their gender masks as much as possible in favour of relating to one another as persons rather than as men and women obliged by social convention to exhibit the appropriate stock characteristics.

Sexual relations are made very difficult in Tajikistan as a result of Soviet prudery combined with the strictness of Tajik gender norms. This has made the mutual enjoyment of the marriage bed something that is practically impossible for many couples. Sexual relations are often virtual, if not actual, rape, not always because of men’s active bad intentions but more through ignorance of female sexuality and/or indifference to their wives’ feelings. To many Muslims the permission given in the Qur’an for polygyny and divorce suggests that having multiple sex partners is perfectly acceptable, and even preferable to too strong an emotional bond with a spouse that might distract one from one’s duties to God. Thus they do not favour the concept of desire for one specific love object. In Tajikistan the older generation also concur in this, since they feel their authority to be at stake if their children love too strongly. But the labour migration of perhaps half the adult males of Tajikistan to Russia in the last few years has produced a new situation whereby many men have a Russian second wife. This has given them novel aspirations for marital relations, added to the new ideas that are infiltrating through foreign influences, particularly the media.

In conclusion I attempt to summarise the findings of the book and provide further reflections on the main theoretical points raised in the course of it. For instance, I introduce the concept of hegemonic femininities to refer to the fact that in Tajikistan women may take on roles within the family traditionally reserved for dominate males, at times virtually usurping their husband’s place as effective head of family. This is possible in great part because these women did not so much internalise the traits of subordination they displayed in their youth as use gender masks to conceal variant performances.

My findings in the matter of the achievements of socialism were ambiguous. In Tajikistan, the end result of the decades of Soviet rule was that on the one hand women had gained a certain amount of mobility, access to education and jobs and a standard of living far higher than that of the countries on its southern border. On the other hand, resistance to the Soviet regime’s cultural penetration produced a set of extremely constraining gender norms that were strictly enforced by the community at large on its members. Moreover, while the standard of living has been severely eroded by the post-Soviet, post-war conditions, the rigid social controls have not been transformed, although they are being modified by the present state of socio-economic chaos.

A comparison between the West and Tajikistan suggests that there is far more resemblance between these societies than is usually believed and that this is directly due to a similarity in gender norms. The study ends by recommending some directions for future
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research, including a plea for scholars to treat the study of Western middle-class white communities on the same level as non-western ones, for gender to be an analytical concept in all social-science research and for researchers to support the most vulnerable members of society, most particularly women and the young.