

## ‘How can I be post-Soviet if I was never Soviet?’ Rethinking categories of time and social change – a perspective from Kulob, southern Tajikistan

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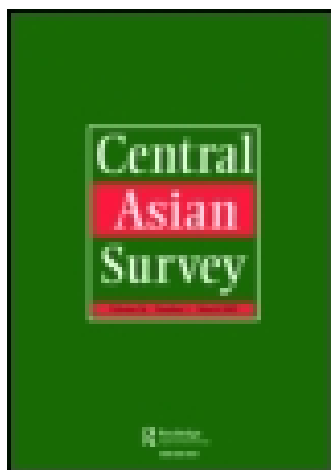
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## ‘How can I be post-Soviet if I was never Soviet?’ Rethinking categories of time and social change – a perspective from Kulob, southern Tajikistan

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Based on anthropological fieldwork conducted in the Kulob region of southern Tajikistan, this paper examines the extent to which the existing periodization ‘Soviet/post-Soviet’ is still valid to frame scholarly works concerning Central Asia. It does so through an analysis of ‘alternative temporalities’ conveyed by Kulob residents to the author. These alternative temporalities are fashioned in especially clear ways in a relationship to the physical transformations occurring to two types of housing, namely flats in building blocks and detached houses. Without arguing that the categories ‘Soviet’ and ‘post-Soviet’ have become futile, the author advocates that the uncritically use of Soviet/post-Soviet has the unwanted effect of shaping the Central Asian region as a temporalized and specialized ‘other’.

**Keywords:** Soviet; post-Soviet; time; temporality; chronology; housing

### Introduction

Looking for shelter to protect ourselves from the midday sun and heat of Kulob city in summer, Zamira and I squatted under the shade of a plane tree. Zamira was born in 1992 and at the time of our conversation (2010) she was a student of medicine in Kulob State University. That day we discussed about what we meant by ‘Soviet’. Then I asked her: ‘Do you consider Tajikistan or yourself post-Soviet?’ Zamira was silent for a couple of minutes and finally replied in English:

How can I be post-Soviet if I was never Soviet? Perhaps my parents are post-Soviets. Wait! No! My parents were not Soviet, were they? In any case my father is ex-Soviet, but my mother never worked, but instead she was always sitting at home. Is that what you mean by Soviet? Working for the Russians? Then my father is ex-Soviet, not post-Soviet; and my mother was never Soviet. I don’t know! You confuse me! I didn’t see any of this. How can I know?

This article focuses on alternative temporalities that were conveyed to me by Kulob residents and not classified straightforwardly in relationship to the categories ‘Soviet’ and ‘post-Soviet’ that are a pervasive feature of the scholarly analysis of Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> By alternative temporalities, I mean lived and subjective time, which people narrate in relation to their personal experiences of transformations occurring in their lives and their surroundings and that often escape historical chronology and teleological linearity. These temporalities do not exist in a vacuum and indeed are informed by historical chronology (Koselleck 1995); as Sharma (2014, 9) puts it, lived time is ‘structured in specific political and economic contexts’ (see also Munn 1992; Barak 2013). However, the article’s aim of exploring alternative temporalities and markers of time that escape the existing chronological periodization of Soviet/post-Soviet pursues a broader goal: firstly, to *rethink* the use of these conventional categories and periodization in much public debate and academic writing concerning Central Asia; and, secondly, to provoke further discussions by scholars of this region and other geographical spaces once forming part of the Soviet

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Union about the prerequisite, or otherwise, of framing our scholarly work in terms of the categories ‘Soviet’ and ‘post-Soviet’.

During the course of my many encounters with Tajiks of all ages, I came to see how many of them, like Zamira, had an ambiguous impression of what I meant by ‘Soviet’ (*vaqti shurovî*) and ‘post-Soviet’ (*ba’di shurovî*) in our conversations.<sup>2</sup> This was true not only for youngsters like Zamira, who, as she put it, ‘had not seen’ (experienced) the Soviet time, and therefore found it difficult to explain what the ‘post-Soviet’ time entailed. In addition, Kulob residents who were born and lived most of their life during the Soviet era also conveyed to me a certain ambiguity when referring to the division between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

For example, *bobo* (‘grandfather’) Nurali, a man in his 70s, told me that he knew what the Soviet times were. In a joking tone, he stated the names of the Soviet leaders, from Lenin to Gorbachov. He proceeded to clarify that these names carried no meaning or significance to him and to many people he knew in Kulob. He said that, in his opinion, Kulob residents were ‘stuck’ (*beta’gir*) in the present (*hozir*) and could not even afford to think about the future because they spend their times attempting to make a living day by day. If men like *bobo* Nurali were eager to talk about the ‘Soviet times’ either in such challenging ways or with more positive assessments about the past, women who remembered their lives before Tajikistan’s independence seldom referred to the category ‘Soviet times’. Instead, they tended to mark the passage of time using the categories ‘before’ (*pesh*) and ‘after’ (*ba’d*). The event from which they evaluated before and after, however, was located in their life-history and could refer, among a great diversity of events, to their wedding, the death of a close relative, Tajikistan’s civil war or their family’s relocation to a different village when they were children.<sup>3</sup> Frequently, I asked these women whether the events they referred to as marking ‘before’ or ‘after’ happened during the ‘Soviet times’; more often than not, my question gave opportunity to further misunderstanding. For instance, I gathered the life-history of *apa* (‘elder sister’) Zitora, a woman born in the 1950s in the district of Mu’minobod in Kulob region. *Apa* Zitora, as she narrated to me, lived most of her life in seclusion because she was not permitted to leave her house by her ‘very strict’ (*sakht*) husband and mother-in-law until their death in the 1980s. If *apa* Zitora left her house to visit relatives or to attend a wedding, she would do so in her husband’s car, and, following the ‘path of Islam’ as she put it to me, she would wear *faranjî* or a veil covering her hair and face leaving only her eyes unconcealed. Being aware of the Soviet policies banning practices of seclusion and veiling in Central Asia (Northrop 2004; Kamp 2006), I asked *apa* Zitora what were the reactions of Soviet and local authorities about her lifestyle, and what she made at all about her life in the ‘Soviet times’. She replied:

Soviet? (*Shurovi*) No. What Soviet? They are in Moscow [original in present tense]. Here in Kulob nobody says anything. How could people say that a man’s wife is at home or is not? How could people know? People do not ask these questions.

*Apa* Zitora’s response about the ‘Soviet’, Zamira’s reflections on the ‘post-Soviet’ and *bobo* Nurali’s vision of being ‘stuck’ in the present are some examples of what I refer to as ‘alternative temporalities’ in this article. These examples also illustrate ‘temporal dissociation’ in the sense that, firstly, my interlocutors and I did not ‘share temporal frameworks’ that made our ‘communication inter-subjectively significant’ (Birth 2008, 4) notably in relationship to the categories Soviet and post-Soviet. Secondly, these people’s replies underscore the unchallenged use of the division between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods in much writing of Central Asia especially when contrasted with the relative absence of such straightforward distinctions in the narratives and life-histories of my acquaintances and interlocutors in Kulob. In the following section, I will explore how this temporal dissociation is created, on the one hand, by a lack of understanding between ethnographer and informants about the meaning of broad historical

categories and, on the other hand, by rigid historical frameworks that explain social change exclusively in terms of existing periodization. I aim to demonstrate that this temporal dissociation shapes the Central Asian region and its diverse populations as a distanced ‘other’.<sup>4</sup>

### Temporal dissociation and ‘the other’

In his seminal book *Time and the Other* (1983), Johannes Fabian argued that, for many years, the style in which ethnographic works were written created a distance between the ethnographer’s temporality and that of ‘the other’ or the supposed object of ‘observation’ in anthropological research. By keeping this ‘other’ outside of the ‘here and now’, the ethnographer denied mutual contemporaneity and created temporal dissociation, or what Fabian termed ‘allochronism’. The result of this was the reproduction of a discourse based on difference that not only temporalized, but also specialized the other, as well as justified and reproduced hierarchies of power and political domination. I suggest that an example of this denial of contemporaneity is conveyed by the uncritical use of the label ‘post-Soviet’ in numerous works on Central Asia. ‘Post-Soviet’ implies, in many cases, a temporal and spatial category to which most of the authors do not locate ourselves; after all, as Zamira put it, we cannot be post-Soviet if we were never Soviet. Or in other words, we do not always position our identities, world views, inhabited spaces and everyday experiences in terms of ‘post-Soviet’ or ‘post-Cold War’ Europe; we may do less so if somebody asks us about our life-history. In terms of Fabian’s allochronism, this temporal dissociation gives the impression that Central Asia exists in a different spatialized and temporalized world of otherness in relation to the major centres of production of knowledge – where these works are being written/funded.

In a challenge to such forms of temporal dissociation, Fabian (1983) advanced the term ‘coevalness’. This refers to the creation and affirmation of an inter-subjective time that emerges from the encounter between anthropologists and their informants. Fabian emphasized that coevalness can be achieved in ethnographic writing by avoiding the ethnographic present and by illustrating the historical background of the people and places under study. However, Birth (2008) noted that coevalness did not fully complete the work of unravelling the a-temporality of the informant in ethnographic writing because the ethnographer’s temporalities (e.g. as fieldworker, writer and published author) remained suspended outside the narrative-time of the ethnographer. Hence, Birth suggested that inter-subjective time does not only refer to Fabian’s coevalness, but rather that it has two further meanings. Intersubjective time points, firstly to the experiences shared by ethnographer and informants across a specific period of time; and secondly, to the ‘shared temporal frameworks used to make communication inter-subjectively significant’ (4). Birth argues that by creating a historical framework for ethnographic writing the author subsumes the narrative into a particular history. This overcomes the problem of allochronism, yet creates ‘homochronism’, or ‘a single all-encompassing set of temporal tropes’ (9). This is the effect that, I suggest, results from the periodization encompassing Tajikistan, and more generally Central Asia, as ‘Soviet’ and ‘post-Soviet’. These historical frames are too widely restricted to the already-made chronological periodization that emerges from conventional forms of history writing. As a result, those temporal frameworks that do not fit within these periods yet might be more meaningful for local people in everyday contexts have largely remained underexplored.

Based on comprehensive ethnographic analysis of the transformations occurring in the previous Soviet and Socialist settings regarding the market and capitalist economy in everyday life, scholars have adopted a critical position towards the straightforward use of terms such as ‘transition’ overemphasized in works dealing mainly with the macroeconomic and political changes applied to ‘post-Soviet’, ‘post-Socialist’ and ‘post-Communist’ countries (Hann 1993; Verdery 1996, 1999; Humphrey 2002; Mandel and Humphrey 2002). The effect that the label

'transition' conveyed, these authors productively argued, was that alternative forms of social and economic change in everyday sociality were concealed under the teleological assumption that societies were in transit from socialism to liberalization, the free market and democracy. Other authors engaged in prolific discussions about the extent to which Central Asia (and those spaces that were once part of the Soviet Union) could be framed within not only post-socialist studies, but also postcolonial studies, especially in relation to the influence, firstly, of the Russian endeavour in the 19th century and, secondly, the Soviet project in the form of either an 'experiment' (Cole and Kandiyoti 2002) or a colonial enterprise (Chari and Verdery 2009). In this sense, the processes central to the creation of the Soviet state and its citizens (underpinned by the design of national, ethnic and gender policies) have been explained in terms of syncretism (Kandiyoti 2002), hybridization (Northrop 2004) and assimilation (Hirsch 2005). Yet, Chari and Verdery (2009, 11–12) concluded that 'post-socialism' has been exploited as a temporal trope referring to 'whatever would follow once the means of production were privatized and the Party's political monopoly disestablished'. Following the call from Chari and Verdery to assess critically the use of 'post-socialism', and based on a comparative study between the regions of Gorno-Badakhshan in Tajikistan (GBAO) and the Gilgit-Balistan in Pakistan, Mostowlansky (2014, 190) questioned 'the extent to which GBAO's conventional periodization of colonial/socialist/post-socialist can be considered legitimate'. The author highlighted thus how the emergence of GBAO in the early Soviet context as a 'postcolonial' entity, and its further development in the context of the Cold War has shaped GBAO as a 'modern' and 'socialist' space in relation to its 'backward', 'colonial' and 'capitalist' bordering neighbours.

In addition to these studies challenging the analytical appropriateness of labels such as transition, post-socialism and post-colonialism to stand for the complexities of the societies once forming part of the Soviet/Socialist block, scholars have also engaged in fruitful debates about the making of landscapes and space in the Central Asian region. Reeves (2011, 307–308) has called for scholars to reassess Central Asia as a place that is 'lived differently' and is formed of a 'sedimentation of histories'. Works exploring this juncture between history and space have analysed the politics of national history to the making of independent nation-states in Uzbekistan (March 2002; Adams 2010) and Turkmenistan (Kuru 2002; Kiepenheuer-Drechsler 2006). Other works have focused on local history and analysed its relation to shrines and museums (Iloliev 2008), the ageing body (Marsden 2012b), and the making and claiming of ethnicized spaces (Beyer 2011; Mostowlansky 2012).

The present article builds on these strands in the expanding body of literature on Central Asia. I agree with Humphrey (2002), who suggested that broader categories such as Soviet, post-Soviet and post-Socialist serve to locate ethnographic analyses in history, and this also allows their comparison within broader analytical fields. Yet I also have come to see how the boundary often drawn between the Soviet and the post-Soviet periods has, as Louw (2007, 16–17) suggests, 'inhibited an understanding of the complex and often ambiguous ways people made sense of experience along historical lines'. Furthermore, whilst works focused on space have acknowledged the importance of 'diverse trajectories, peoples, things and ideas' (Reeves 2011, 313) to the making of place, fewer authors have theorized the importance of such heterogeneity to the making of time, or to the analysis of a great diversity of senses of time among the populations of the former Soviet Union and Central Asia.<sup>5</sup> I aim to contribute to these existing debates by suggesting that the categories Soviet and post-Soviet have remained significant to the classification, periodization and hierarchization of time which posit '1991' (the end of the Soviet Union) as the reified 'event' from which scholarly contrived temporal frameworks are mainly organized. The categories 'Soviet' and 'post-Soviet' in Central Asia have remained, as Kwon (2010, 4) proposes for the category 'Cold War', 'essential spatiotemporal markers to contextualize contemporaneous events and developments on the basis of a radical rupture in time'. This

pertains to chronological time that inevitably indicates historical ‘stages’ of human activity which follow ‘progressive developmental steps’ (De Landa 2000, 6), but that not always reflect the ever-changing temporal dissociations between scholars and their informants or the lived time that supersede the logics of chronological periodization.

Anthropological studies of history and its relationship to temporality aim to move beyond an understanding of history as a ‘plain historical chronology of one-damn-thing-after-another [which] fails to recognize the collusion of people in the making of material life and events through significant timing’ (James and Mills 2005, 14; see also Shryock 1997). In addition, in their work on Ghana, for example, Tashjian and Allmann (2000, 2) noticed that ‘pre-colonial’ and ‘colonial’ periods applied to the history of Asante women ‘lack explanatory power’. The reason is that, according to the authors, the linear chronology and the existing meta-narratives of pre-colonial/colonial applied to Asante history ‘are based, for the most part, upon the lived experiences of elite males’ and therefore are inadequate to comprehensively frame the life-histories of Asante’s first generation of colonized women (3). Building upon these works that question the relevance of existing meta-narratives to frame social change as lived experience, I suggest that the uncritical use of the categories and periodization Soviet/post-Soviet fail to recognize that historical time is characterized by ‘change, sequence and coherence’ judiciously organized (Owen Hughes 1995, 4). The periodization Soviet/post-Soviet is reinforced by the history of the Cold War, and as such, to assumptions of teleological morality, property and advancement towards a future that ideally will be new insofar as it is lineal and progressive. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink whether this existing periodization has ‘explanatory power’ to reveal lived time in relationship to the variegated life-histories, experiences and trajectories of a great diversity of heterogeneous populations in Central Asia. The chronology of the periodization Soviet/post-Soviet and the lived time narrated embodied and enacted by diverse Central Asian peoples may indeed coincide, but often these two aspects of time do diverge (Koselleck 1995). The following section will analyse how the divergence between historical categories and the narration of alternative temporalities by my informants in Kulob were related firstly to what actually counted as an event for them; to the duration of time (how long an event is perceived to last); to sequence (how an event comes after another); to speed (senses of occurrences happening in slow or fast motion, or of being stagnant); and to direction (unilinear, multilinear, cyclical, fragmented).<sup>6</sup> The senses of these divergences between chronological periodization and lived time, as Ferry and Limbert (2008, 13) put it, were ‘extremely subtle’ and if they were not made in direct statements, they could be found in ‘the ways in which people convey feelings and sentiments of fate, surprise, hope, optimism, pessimism, pride of origin’. I explore these temporalities exclusively in relation to evaluations that Kulob residents conveyed to me in relation to the transformations occurring to the houses in which they lived.

### ***Bobo Kurbon: ‘involution’ and the vertical village***

In Kulob region, people differentiate between two kinds of housing: on the one hand, the flat (*kvartira*) located in apartment blocks and, on the other, the detached one- or two-storey houses (*havli*) with a vegetable garden, outdoor kitchen and bathroom. During most of my fieldwork I lived with a local family in a flat, and thus had the opportunity of visiting and talking to my hosts’ neighbours, acquaintances and relatives in a great variety of flats located in the apartment blocks (*seksia*) where we lived.

On the occasion of his son’s wedding, I met *bobu* Kurbon, a man who was well known to my hosts and who, after the event, would invite me to drink tea and chat with him, his wife and adult children whenever I passed in front of their building. *Bobo* Kurbon was born in 1944 in a village located in the lowlands of Vose’ district that is contiguous to Kulob district. He told me that his



previous job during the ‘Soviet times’ (*vaqti shurovi*) as an economist had entitled him to receive from the state the flat where he lived with his family during the 1980s, before he was finally able to buy it in the late 1990s. While telling me stories about his life, his family and Kulob city, *bobo* Kurbon also explained to me the ways in which his surroundings had changed. If women in Kulob, as I have discussed above, tended to use ‘before’ and ‘today’ in their narratives to mark varying forms of social change, then *bobo* Kurbon and his neighbours often mentioned the striking differences between city life and village life that are also salient to other Central Asian communities. *Bobo* Kurbon highlighted these differences when he reflected on transformations affecting his flat, building and wider neighbourhood. He told me:

This *seksia* was built in the late 1980s. It is the newest of all *seksia* in Kulob. In the old times it was such a pride to live in a flat in the *seksia*. I arrived from a village to Kulob, Kulob city! City life was different from village life. It is still different, but nowadays the difference is less than before. In those times, living in a *havli* was not modern. Being modern meant to have a flat, you know? [To have] A fridge! An air conditioner! Gas! We opened the tap and had flowing water! A bath! A toilet! All clean! A job in the city! We had all of these things. Nowadays? No! Now I tell my sons: ‘go back to the village’. I want to sell this flat and buy a big *havli* with some cows and sheep in a remote village in the mountains. Why does somebody want a flat without electricity, gas, water or anything? You see? Everybody goes out [from the flats] and cooks in the street! What is this? Women are unable to make a fire within their flats, so they go out to cook with wood. Instead of gas heating, we have to install a stove and open a hole in the window. We also have to cut wood in the autumn. Last year it was so cold – minus 30 degrees some days – and for this reason we burnt even our old shoes because the logs which were available were insufficient. What is a city-life like this? We became villagers trapped in these buildings! You see? This is not evolution (*evolyutsiya*) but the other way around (*naoborot*).

During my stay in the apartment blocks in Kulob city, I learnt that the shortages of electricity and running water in these buildings were common. These utilities were provided from 5:00 to 8:00 a. m., one hour during lunch time, and at night from 7:00 to 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. But water only reached the flats located on the first floor of the five- to nine-storey buildings. People living on higher floors had to fetch water from the communal taps that are also found in the courtyards of the apartment blocks – although these taps also supplied water at specific hours. There was no central heating in Kulob, and gas was also rarely available.

*Bobo* Kurbon’s anxieties about life in the decaying flats were shared by many of his male neighbours: these men were concerned about the city becoming ‘like a village’ (*rangi qishloq*).<sup>7</sup> This expression was explained to me not only in terms of infrastructure decaying as time goes by, but also, and above all, as a result of Kulob city having gone through a process of ‘involution’ (*aqibmonda*).<sup>8</sup> This can be explained by the importance that *bobo* Kurbon and other neighbours gave to the Russian term *sovremennye*, which in this context means ‘modern’, ‘contemporary’, ‘present-day’ and ‘up to date’. When first built, the flats had amenities that qualified them, together with the *seksia* and its dwellers, as being *sovremennye*. *Bobo* Kurbon explained his use of the term ‘involution’ by arguing that they reached a state of advancement on the path to ‘progress’ (*prodvizhenie*), most especially in relation to the surrounding villages which were ‘inferior’ (*past*) in the sense of being less advanced in terms of what he, and many of his neighbours, considered as being the path to progress and modernization. Rural areas and *havlis* were not seen as being ‘contemporary’ to the flats because they and their dwellers were conceived, and to a certain extent are still perceived and represented nationally, as signifying the Tajik past and the romanticized Tajik tradition. However *bobo* Kurbon argued that the flats in Kulob were presently crumbling and they no longer represented the ‘modernity’ of the time that they had done when he and others like him firmly believed in the reality of progress.

In addition, the current condition of the flats was not seen merely as an inevitable result of time passing. For instance, on one occasion *bobo* Kurbon and some of his neighbours mentioned

to me that the government was at fault because it caused repeated shortages of electricity, the rationing of water and the complete lack of a gas supply. They often described to me this situation by complaining about the state of the toilets within the flats. One of *bobo* Kurbon's neighbours told me:

The toilets in the flats were meant to be flushed [ ... ] but without running water, how can you assure that this task is performed? The dirtiness and smelliness of our toilets are disgusting [ ... ] and this is because *they* [the government] don't supply us with water. At least in the villages the toilets are in the fields far from the houses and kitchens [ ... ] but in our flats we are trapped with dirty toilets next to our bedrooms.

However *bobo* Kurbon and his neighbours also blamed their wives and daughters for not fetching enough water to flush the lavatories, and themselves for not working to improve the decaying infrastructure. They said that owners had neither the money nor the means to repair their flats and the infrastructure of the buildings, although, on many occasions, I saw them trying to repair communal broken water pipes and electrical circuits and transformers.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in most of the conversations about the state of the flats, nobody in particular was to be blamed: the damaged infrastructure above and below the surface was transforming Kulob from an urban to a rural space.<sup>10</sup> In this type of narratives, villages and *havlis* were denied contemporaneity with the modern flats because they were seen as inferior or as being from the past. At the same time, the decaying flats were conceived by *bobo* Kurbon and most of his neighbours as passing through a process of 'involution'. This is also why *bobo* Kurbon told me that he did not want to live in a city that had lost its former meaning; and the apartment blocks were, slowly but surely, becoming vertical villages.

*Bobo* Kurbon's account can be understood in relation to what Ssorin-Chaikov (2006) calls 'temporalities of socialism'. These posit the present time as socialism's achievement and, simultaneously, also as a void towards a teleological 'leap forward'. *Bobo* Kurbon's former present (in other words, the period during which his flat functioned properly) reflected Soviet achievements, whilst at the same time it also announced a future 'leap forward' towards progress. This former present marks the point of departure or rupture from which *bobo* Kurbon evaluates Kulob passing through 'involution', or going backwards. Yet, since the deterioration of his flat has been gradual, the turning point from which he narrates time going by cannot be set at an exact date or historical event, for example 1991, or the sudden end of the Soviet Union. Rather, his points of reference in time were fluid, complex and imprecise, as I now explore in further detail.

Even when *bobo* Kurbon at times referred to the 'Soviet times', he did not call the period that followed it as being 'post-Soviet'. Moreover, his narratives of events in the 'Soviet times' were magnified by emphasizing years and decades, whilst his notion of what had happened 'recently' to his flat and Kulob city points towards a different 'historical tempo' (Sahlins 2004, 132) in which the density of events in *bobo* Kurbon's narratives end up in runny moments occurring as daily life progresses. For instance, *bobo* Kurbon often referred to 'yesterday' or 'last year' to narrate when a pipe in his building had broken or a transformer had exploded. Then he would explain to me that it did not matter whether these occurrences actually happened 'yesterday', 'last year' or 'today' insofar as he and his neighbours had to face the annoying outcomes of these incidences on a daily basis.

In addition, *bobo* Kurbon and many of his neighbours used different temporal points of reference in their narratives depending on the particularity of the situation in which they found themselves. On occasion, I heard some of the neighbours referring to the time 'after the destruction of the Soviet Union'. However, these men equally located this period towards 1992, 1996 or, indeed, to the year 2000. Other men preferred to refer to a time 'after Tajikistan's independence' (*ba'di istiqlol*), and others to 'during the war' (*dar vaqti jang*). Although most men I spoke to meant during the Tajik civil war (1992–97), two veterans of the Second World War meant the beginning

of the 1940s. On the whole, my informants rarely provided chronological dates for these events, thus leaving open large spaces for interpretation or, more accurately, long spans of time for framing ongoing transformations.

These were the common time-frames expressed by men who have lived considerably part of their lives in the USSR. In contrast, men of younger generations told me, as did my friend Zamira, that the notion of the ‘Soviet times’ was confusing because they did not ‘see’ (experience) it. *Bobo* Kurbon, for example, had three sons who were born in the 1990s and thus were in their early 20s at the time of my fieldwork. They perceived and evaluated their flat, and the surrounding buildings in a very different temporal perspective to that of their father and other elderly men, even if they all inhabited the same space and had the same problems accessing basic utilities. These young men contested their father’s idea about Kulob city undergoing a process of ‘involution’. Like many other youngsters I spoke to, they frequently told me that in Kulob ‘nothing has ever changed and will never change’. In their opinion, time and things in Kulob were, rather, stagnant. They had no experience of the ‘modernity’ or previous comfort in the flat that their father often spoke about; they only remembered the flat being as it was presently, with its rusty pipes and lack of a permanent supply of water or electricity. In contrast to Kulob, where, according to these boys, ‘nothing changes’, they and their friends told me that in Russia, where they had taken seasonal jobs, things were better and continually change for the better. According to Munir, one of *bobo* Kurbon’s sons who worked as a builder of *dachas* (country houses) near Moscow and who was visiting Kulob during his holidays, ‘only in Moscow does time move forward’ (*vremya idët vperëd*). He meant that in Russia, in comparison with Kulob, there is a sense of progress especially in relation to the buildings erected in Russia’s major cities.

Building on Ssorin-Chaikhov’s (2006) work on heterochrony, I suggest that the inhabitants of the same flat and apartment block narrate manifold temporal experiences that overlap one another. The manifold nature of the flat’s dwellers’ temporal experiences and the markers they use to distinguish time periods reflect gender and age distinctions as well as the divergent trajectories, past experiences and notions about the current ‘present’ as well as differing expectations about the future. These diverse meanings of time are only ‘visible from the point of view of’ their ‘limits in relation to one another’ (371). Together these temporalities constitute a *heterochrony* that juxtaposes ‘in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible’ (Foucault 1997, 183, cited in Ssorin-Chaikhov 2006, 357). Therefore, *bobo* Kurbon, his flat and his sons cannot be straightforwardly located in a single and all-encompassing ‘post-Soviet time/space’. The following section analyses how this heterochrony was realized not only in relation to *bobo* Kurbon, his sons and the flat in which they lived, but also it existed on a broader and even more complicated scale that was mapped onto the ways in which Kulob’s inhabitants envisaged the city’s neighbourhoods. If the *seksia* and flat life was seen by *bobo* Kurbon as having marked the epitome of progress, and this was the point against which he measured the process of involution affecting his building and city, these same developments were seen in very different terms by *moma* (‘grandmother’) Zubaida whose house was located in a neighbourhood composed of detached houses or *havlis*.

### ***Moma* Zubaida and the *havli***

Like *bobo* Kurbon, *moma* Zubaida had lived most of her life during the Soviet period, and at the time of my research she was in her 70s. After getting married in a mountainous region bordering Pamir, she and her husband arrived in Kulob city and began to build a *havli* made of mud-bricks (*khishti khom*) on the outskirts of the city. Decades afterwards, at the time of my fieldwork, *moma* Zubaida’s house was sited at the edge of the compound of apartment blocks where *bobo* Kurbon’s flat was situated. Showing me her wrinkled hands, the elderly woman emphasized that she and her

deceased husband built, and repeatedly repaired, their *havli* by making their own mud-bricks. In her usual joking tone, she remarked that building something by themselves was something that could not be said of the ‘lazy’ (*tanbal*) people living in the flats. In his work on Astana, Buchli (2007) noticed that mud-bricks denoted ‘pre-modern times’ in contrast to concrete building blocks and other construction materials that were available in the region thanks to the industrialization of the Soviet Union. However for *moma* Zubaida, the flats built with concrete building blocks (*sementblok*) did not symbolize the ideals of progress and betterment arriving with urbanization. She told me that, instead, the buildings represented for her the inability of people to demonstrate a key principle of being human (*inson*): working with one’s hands.

Buchli (1999, 2007) suggests that being human is related to the shelters that people craft in which to live, and policies regarding buildings and the domestic spaces within them were at the core of the formation of the Socialist person and citizen in the Soviet Union. In the former Soviet Union, he goes on to argue, living ‘normally’ meant ‘being modern’, and this was a key element in the processes of personhood. Thus ‘the materiality of the built forms’, he says, ‘belie deeper and more significant questions concerning the very terms of being’ (Buchli 2007, 47; see also Marchand 2009). For *moma* Zubaida, however, being ‘modern’ was not an aspiration. In contrast to *bobo* Kurbon’s views, for this woman the *seksia*, flats and concrete building blocks marked a leap backwards (signalled by the loss of the human capacity to build shelters by hand for self-use) rather than a socialist achievement or a point in the linear and teleological progress towards the future. Therefore, her accounts of time were quite different to those of *bobo* Kurbon. This difference is important as both these individuals were part of the ‘Soviet generation’, yet they held very different conceptions of time and social change.

*Moma* Zubaida explained to me that because for many years she had competently carried out her duties as a cleaner on Kulob’s streets, the local authorities allocated her a flat in a *seksia* after she had applied for one. But, she went on, both her husband and herself refused to reside in the flat because they found it unattractive, even when, at the time, the apartment blocks were newly built. She remarked to me that:

I have always lived in a *havli* here in Kulob city. I cannot imagine living in the *seksia*. It is ugly (*bezeb*)! Here I can have a cow, fresh milk and fresh air. Apart from that, we have never had gas or a continual supply of electricity. We arrived here [in Kulob], and we didn’t have gas. Later we sometimes had electricity, but not gas. We don’t have [running] water either. There was a lake here before [pointing to a hill outside her house], and there were canals [in front of the house]. I had a neighbour, Nikolai, whose pigs used to walk in these canals. Now these canals don’t have water and there is neither Nikolai nor his pigs. Surrounding this area there was wheat (*gandum*) [...] wheat and more beautiful wheat. If you gazed into the distance, you could only see wheat. Now there are buildings and the *seksia*.

As noted above, villages and *havlis*, together with cities and flats, are commonly used among people in Tajikistan to create temporal markers: the former being backward, traditional, static and from the past; the latter clean, modern and progressive. *Bobo* Kurbon’s complaint about ‘the city becoming a village’ also refers to people living in previously ‘modern’ flats now without electricity or running water, but with goats and cows in their courtyards. During my fieldwork, these animals could be seen walking around the *seksia*, and ruminating around the ground floors of the apartment blocks – something that for this man acted as a visual sign of the city’s ‘involution’. Cows, together with goats, sheep and donkeys, are central to the ways in which Tajikistan’s landscape is invested with value, both officially and in a day-to-day manner in people’s conversations. Officially, such animals are viewed as a quintessential feature of Tajikistan’s bucolic landscape, yet are seen as having no place in the modern aesthetics of the country’s urban centres. For example in 2009, Tajikistan’s President Emmomali Rahmon prohibited Dushanbe’s inhabitants from keeping cattle, donkeys and rabbits at home, even if people owned or

rented *havlis* and had sufficient space for animals in the city. These animals, evaluated as potent symbols of a village life, were not in consonance with the capital city, the supposed centre of modernity and urbanity.

By contrast, in *moma* Zubaida's account, the apparent opposition between villages and cities is not so fixed or straightforward. She frequently spoke with pride about keeping at least one cow in her *havli*. For her, the cow was the living indication of her rural roots and ability to continue to live the 'good life' by preparing home-made dairy products. *Moma* Zubaida therefore refused to accept discourses emphasizing the stark division between 'backwardness' and 'modernity' that the differences between city and village were supposed to entail. She chose, rather, to highlight that since her arrival in Kulob in the 1950s, *havlis*, fields and cattle had all mushroomed within the city. In contrary to *bobo* Kurbon's opinion, *moma* Zubaida did not think that Kulob was more or less rural than before. For her, rather, the city had always incorporated both rural and urban aspects. She did not see Kulob's rurality as an aspect of 'involution' or of a city being turned into a village as a result of its decaying infrastructure and the lack of electricity, gas and running water. These utilities, and the forms of modernity that they apparently brought with them, were never, for her, a permanent feature of life in her house and neighbourhood.

If, *bobo* Kurbon, interpreted the decay of his flat as a point of reference for understanding the ways in which time passes, then, for *moma* Zubaida, a key point of reference for understanding changes in her life and its surroundings was the disappearance of the lake and the fields of wheat that had once flanked her house; and she often remarked, sadly, that this had happened when the *seksia* was built (according to *bobo* Kurbon in the 1980s). A further indicator of change for this woman was, as she put it to me, the departure of her former, and 'very kind', Russian neighbour, Nikolai. She did not provide a date for Nikolai's departure, but most Russians left Kulob after the onset of the civil war in 1992. Thus, for *moma* Zubaida, major transformations in her surroundings were judged in relation to unfolding absences manifested both in the landscape and her social relations. Hereby the fields of wheat were occupied by building blocks in the 1980s about the same time when her husband died; her Russian neighbour (together with most of the Russians from Kulob) left during the civil war, and finally her sons left home and went to work in Russia after experiencing increasing food prices and decreasing social and health benefits from the state as well as opportunities to get a job or a steady salary. When asked about an approximate time or event buttressing these processes, she often replied 'before', but did not mention the end of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan's independence or the civil war.

By means of an analysis of the narratives of *bobo* Kurbon and *moma* Zubaida who lived most of their lives during the Soviet period, and of *bobo* Kurbon's sons who did not experience the Soviet times, I hope to have brought attention to the manifold temporalities creating heterochrony, rather than a single space-time that can be straightforwardly labelled as 'post-Soviet'. The ways in which people in Kulob related to the 'events' that would mark the 'before' or 'after' in their narratives and life-histories, and the evaluations about how time passes in relationship to the visible transformations in their houses, vary greatly in relation to differences of gender, generation and age. The 'alternative temporalities' do not exist completely detached from the transformations that occurred in the wake of the end of the Soviet Union; my informants often made remarks about the sudden increasing prices of basic goods, the disappearance of the welfare state, and the privatization of land and factories. In this sense, chronology and lived time coincided. Yet the changes brought about by these historical processes were expressed by Kulob residents in ways that reveal how different people think about, and experience, the passing of time in diverse paces, sequences and directions that supersede existing periodization.

## Conclusions

I have sought to demonstrate the limitations that dividing Central Asia's modern history into well-bounded periods, especially the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, poses for anthropological attempts to understand alternative temporalities that the region's people inhabit and reshape in their everyday sociality. The division of time in periods is one of the most fundamental, yet major theoretical challenges of history as a discipline: without categorizing and subdividing the past, it is difficult to make time intelligible. Green (1992, 4), however, suggests that '[o]nce firmly drawn and widely accepted, period frontiers can become intellectual straitjackets [...] standard periods become self-contained entities, and this influences the way we identify issues and apply emphases' to our analysis. Following a different methodology, which emphasizes the significance of local narratives about the changes to the houses and their infrastructure in Kulob, and the evaluations of these by men and women of different ages, I have argued not merely that the Soviet policies had diverse effects over the vast geographical areas in which they were implemented but also, and most importantly, that the so-called 'Soviet era' was experienced and is currently narrated in a great variety of forms by people in Kulob itself, and this is regardless of the fact that they belong to the so-called 'Soviet generation'.<sup>11</sup>

This is important for current scholarly endeavours in Central Asia because rather than dividing time into the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, many of the women and men in Kulob with whom I spoke thought about changes in their collective and personal situations by reference to a more complex open-ended range of temporal distinctions. I have also sought, firstly, to challenge the extent to which it is worthwhile to keep classifying Central Asia and, for example, cities, populations, identities, Islam, and other aspects of social life in the region as Soviet or post-Soviet; and secondly, to open a debate about the extent to which alternative temporalities may be useful to rethink and rewrite the history of Central Asia. Without arguing that the categories Soviet and post-Soviet have become futile, I do advocate that in some cases these labels are oversized categories rather than actual referents of time and social transformations conceptualized and experienced by Central Asians. In my study, at least, 'before' and 'today' were referents of time located within the Kulob residents' relations and trajectories, and their knowledge about the history of their families, neighbourhoods and villages. Furthermore, the visible transformations occurring in the houses and surrounding landscapes of Kulob residents resonate more with their vision of gradual, ongoing and multi-linear transformations encompassing their everyday lives rather than with reference to linear chronology and major political events and macroeconomic processes framed by the end of the Soviet Union.

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## Notes

1. Kulob is a city of 78,000 inhabitants located in the Kulob district of the Khatlon region, 203 kilometres south of Tajikistan's capital, Dushanbe (Ya'ubov and Kurbonov 2006). This region is better known as the homeland of Tajikistan's political elite and the country's President Emomali Rahmon (from Danghara, a district within Khatlon) who came to power in 1992 and consolidated his position by fighting opposition forces during the bloody civil war that struck Tajikistan until 1997.
2. This article is based on 16 months of anthropological fieldwork conducted between 2009 and 2013 in Kulob city and several surrounding villages in the Khatlon region. The methodology involved participant observation, open-ended interviews and the recording of 76 life histories. The research was mainly conducted in Tajik and Russian languages as chosen by my interlocutors, although a few youngsters like Zamira preferred to speak with me in English.
3. I analyse in more detail the gender aspects of alternative temporalities in Kulob in my PhD thesis (Ibañez-Tirado 2013). To compare narratives of 'the time before' underpinned by memories as they are reflected, experienced and narrated by ordinary Russian citizens in everyday sociality, see Attwood (2010) and Morris (2014).
4. For critical discussions of the concept of 'cultural regions' and its relationship to scholarly work on Central and South West Asia, see Liu (2011) and Marsden (2012a).
5. Excellent works on lived time are Louw's chapter 'Imagining time' in Louw (2007), and Frederiksen's (2014) more recent ethnography on subjective and societal time in Batumi, Georgia.
6. On the concept of 'event' and its relationship to change, see Humphrey (2008). For a critical approach to the use of scholarly representations of time as geometric metaphors, see Gell (1992).
7. For a discussion of the process of classifying 'villages', 'towns' and 'cities' in Russia with respect to the development of Soviet-era apartment blocks, see White (2004).
8. For a different approach to *involution* understood as the process of shifting economic activities from the factory to the household in Russia, see Burawoy, Krotow, and Lytkina (2000) and Rogers (2005).
9. On some occasions people in Kulob spoke proudly about the refurbishment of their flats and houses thanks to the remittances sent by their relatives working in Russia.
10. This sense of lack of entitlement may reflect the shift from dwelling in state-built flats that in the past were supplied with all utilities (Alexander 2007; Laszczkowski 2014) to inhabiting privately owned flats.
11. Although the informants quoted in this chapter are part of 'the Soviet generation' (because they lived during Soviet times), it is important to deploy the category of 'generation' as a methodological device, and not as a 'social fact' (Searle 1995) with collective and shared assumptions of common life experiences (Corsten 1999). In future, works on temporalities and lived time can be fruitfully complemented by 'demographic explorations of ageing, generation and cohort' (Day 2012, 342).

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