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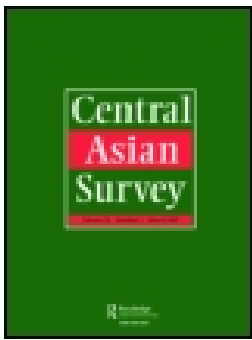
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Everyday disasters, stagnation and the normalcy of non-development: Roghun Dam, a flood, and campaigns of forced taxation in southern Tajikistan

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This article conducts a comparative analysis of a catastrophic flood that hit the Kulob region of southern Tajikistan in 2010, and the government of Tajikistan's campaign to gather money to build the Roghun dam and hydropower station. It advances the notion of 'everyday disasters' in order to explain the imprecise boundaries between major catastrophic events and more mundane dimensions of the everyday as experienced by residents of Kulob. The article seeks to shed light, firstly, on the processes that underpin both Kulob residents' experiences of stagnation and the normalization of non-development, and, secondly, on the ways in which Kulob residents joke and 'do' cunning/cheating whilst dealing with disastrous events in order to cultivate an everydayness that is worth living.

Keywords: disaster; event; everyday life; joking; cunning; Roghun; Tajikistan

The flood: an introduction

The sound of heavy rain and thunder made it difficult to sleep, the night of 6 May 2010 in Kulob, a city of multi-storey Soviet-era buildings and detached houses 200 km south of Dushanbe, Tajikistan's capital. Mijgona, a woman in her mid-thirties who had invited me to spend the night in her house, woke up and noticed that her husband, Mahmud, was not in their room. After waiting for half an hour for Mahmud to return from the outdoor lavatory, she got up to search for him in the house's vegetable garden. In the dark, she did not notice the flow of water invading the garden, flooding the henhouses and submerging the corpses of drowned chickens and partridges. As Mijgona stepped into the mud, she was suddenly dragged downstream several metres, eventually collapsing against the garden's wall. Earlier that night, her husband had also been dragged away by the water. That night, I had heard the noise of water flowing outside the house, but not risen from my sleep. In the morning, I found Mijgona and Mahmud both bruised and obviously upset that they had lost most of their crops and poultry. They also laughed loudly about the reason Mijgona had gone to look for her husband in the middle of the night: fearing the worst, Mijgona had walked to the garden convinced that her beloved Mahmud was secretly meeting another woman. When we stopped laughing at their jokes about Mijgona's jealousy, we concluded that we had been lucky. The house in which they hosted me, and that was located on high ground at the edge of the city, was standing. In contrast, the oldest neighbourhood of Kulob city, Charamgaro Poyon (mainly made up of detached houses), had been destroyed, and many people had perished there.

The next day, when water levels in Charamgaro finally abated, many residents started to re-enter their former neighbourhood to search for the places where their houses had once stood. With

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tears in her eyes, Moma Farzona, an elderly woman who was an acquaintance of my host family in Kulob, explained to me:

Our house was just in front of the bridge – but you see? There is no bridge anymore! ... We saw water and a mess coming and we ran to the roof. Everything was water, water, but it was confusing – everything was dark. ... In the morning we came down. We were frozen and scared. In the door of this room [pointing with her finger] the neighbour's boy was found. They didn't manage to hold his hand or – God knows! But the boy came with the water, mud and rocks and ended up here. Half of his body was trapped under the rocks. We called the neighbours. They came and we told them not to be scared. Nobody knew how to tell them. They saw him. It was hard to pull his body out – oh my God! They pulled him out while removing some heavy boulders. Of course he was dead – dead – inside him all water – oh my God!

There were many stories similar to Moma Farzona's. Days later people in Kulob started to speak about how many of their relatives were in hospital with broken bones; others were said to have been so deeply affected by the events that they had 'gone mad' (*devona shudan*).¹ According to the data released by Tajikistan's government, the flood hit Kulob and several villages in Tajikistan's eastern Khatlon region, resulting in 22 deaths, 55 missing, 200 injured, and 4000 displaced. In the days immediately following the flood, however, the affected people who had gathered in tents in the emergency camp calculated amongst themselves that over 1000 people were dead and many hundreds more missing. According to them, the authorities had refused to make this data public. My informants also told me that, following the 'path of Islam', most people who lost relatives in the flood hurried to bury the bodies of the victims. One informant, whose brother and nephew had drowned, explained to me that the official and bureaucratic procedure required to register a death was too long and, in such circumstances, the process would have surely taken a very long time. Others told me that some people had decided not to register the deaths of relatives so that, in an act of cunning/cheating (*cholok; zirak; fireb kardan*), they could continue to receive the deceased's pensions.

This article is based on 16 months of anthropological fieldwork conducted between 2009 and 2013 in the city of Kulob and several surrounding villages in the Khatlon region of southern Tajikistan.² This region is better known as the homeland of Tajikistan's political elite and the country's president, Emomali Rahmon (he is 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 afflicted Tajikistan until 1997. Since Kulob itself was not the scene of major fighting between the rival factions during the hostilities, the city flourished in the national media as a symbol of government authority. During my fieldwork, however, most Kulob residents identified themselves as 'ordinary' (*oddi*) in order to disconnect themselves from Tajikistan's political elites: my informants and acquaintances explained to me that contrary to what many Tajiks from other regions say, Kulob residents have not benefited from the outcome of the civil war. Rather, they often highlighted that Kulob lost its previous administrative role as the region's capital (which was moved to the city of Qurghon-Teppa) and that many factories from the Soviet era (e.g. food, oil and cotton processing plants) had been shut down, leaving many workers unemployed. Kulob residents' socio-economic positions, education, and backgrounds are of course internally differentiated. Yet most of my informants were united by a number of common characteristics: they shared their homes with extended and itinerant families (with members travelling back and forth to, and sending remittances from, Dushanbe and/or Russia); earned irregular incomes (even though some, like teachers and nurses, worked in stable government positions); and they all also faced recurrent debts and other economic problems arising from their low salaries or periodic unemployment.

Focusing on apparently extraordinary events that occurred in Tajikistan in 2010, this article examines a flood that hit the Kulob region, and a government-led campaign of forced taxation

which aimed to collect funds from Tajikistan's residents in order to finish the construction of a dam and hydropower station in Roghun, on the Vakhksh River. I analyse the ongoing effects that the flood and the campaign, both locally referred to as 'disasters' (*fojia*), had on the everyday lives of numerous Tajikistan residents. The ongoing effects of such disastrous events overlapped with pre-existing constant electric blackouts and shortages of water that meant that many women and children had to fetch water from far from home, or procure wood to cook on fires in outdoor kitchens. Constant debt and chronic illnesses, combined with a lack of sustainable sources of income and affordable medical care, were also cited by my informants as disasters that were not eventful but rather constant aspects of people's daily lives. Therefore, I call the ongoing effects of the flood and the campaign to build Roghun 'everyday disasters'. Rather than drawing a clear boundary between mundane daily life and unexpected/catastrophic events, my acquaintances in southern Tajikistan often told me that there were so many disasters overlapping their daily routines that the general context in which their lives evolve was experienced as stagnation (*kasodi*). *Kasodi* thus implied that the current circumstances of life in Kulob remained stationary: everyday life could not become worse than the disastrous form it already had, but it could not get better either.

Kasodi was described by my informants as happening more acutely in Kulob than 'in other places', such as Moscow or Dushanbe, where, according to them, there existed the possibility that people's lives would improve. Stagnation was also interpreted as evolving from structural problems such as a shortage of well-paid jobs, campaigns of forced taxation, or the failed development projects of both government ministries and NGOs operating in Kulob (e.g. futile government programmes that were launched to improve medical care, or NGO projects designed to improve the access of local populations to clean water). Importantly, however, and related to the question of why stagnation was perceived as a more pronounced feature of life in Kulob than elsewhere, *kasodi* was also seen as a product of Kulob residents' proclivity to acts of cunning/cheating (*cholok*). Cunning/cheating, as I examine in more detail below, was practiced by Kulob residents when they thoughtlessly sought to take advantage of the assistance, aid and charity offered by governmental, religious or international development institutions. Therefore, cunning/cheating was paradoxically implicated in producing stagnation, as well as being a way of dealing with stagnation. Throughout this article, I use the term 'non-development' as an analytical tool to examine the consequences of the more clearly eventful nature of the flood and the campaign to build the Roghun dam and hydropower station, and *kasodi* to convey the enduring experiences of stagnation among Kulob residents.

I will analyse firstly the ways in which disasters were not seen by the people whom I came to know in Kulob as a risk or a danger that could be avoided, administered or mitigated against. In place of such constructions of risk and danger, I argue for a more complex notion of disasters' relation to the specific circumstances in which everyday life evolves. In my informants' case, they have come to assume that stagnation, rather than improvement in their general well-being, is the norm; I refer to this process as 'the normalcy of non-development'. Secondly, I examine the importance that people in southern Tajikistan place on the capacity to endure (*toba owardan*) and to circumnavigate catastrophic events towards a more mundane and less tragic dimension of their everyday lives by tackling *ziq* (a feeling described in southern Tajikistan as world-weariness, sadness, and frustration) both individually and communally, for the sake of cultivating a socially pleasing and sophisticated daily life. I will focus here specifically on forms of joking (*shükhi kardan*) and cunning/cheating that, according to my informants, keep people alive in times of stagnation, trouble and suffering. In this sense, my argument builds upon what Robbins (2013, 457) refers to as 'an anthropology of the good'. For Robbins this project aims to explore 'how people living in different societies strive to create good in their lives' even if such lives are characterized by suffering in the face of diverse forms of violence and deprivation.³

I will conclude by suggesting that joking and cunning/cheating are aspects of my informants' lives of fundamental importance to understand how they do not simply *cope* with misfortune but *deal* with the normalcy of non-development and everyday disasters in creative, lively and morally informed ways. A recognition of these aspects of their daily lives reveals Kulob residents as not the passive victims of 'natural' and socio-economic disasters but agents endowed with the 'means' to strive for a life worth living.

Turning a disastrous event into an ordinary routine

In her study of the affective dimensions of everyday life, Kathleen Stewart (2007) suggests that everyday life consists of complex rhythms of 'flow and arrest'. The flow of everydayness, or 'the still', is interrupted by ordinary events that, nevertheless, disrupt the quietness of this flow: 'a still life pops out of the ordinary' (21). But what counts as an event? In his study of the moral worlds of Moscovites, Zigon (2007) suggests that events are best understood as a form of moral and ethical breakdown. He argues that people live in a comfortable, unreflective and rather embodied mode of everyday life, which is, however, often interrupted by ethical moments, or 'moments that shake one out of the everydayness of being moral' (133). Hoffman and Lubkemann (2005), in their study of 'warscapes' in Africa, remark that the boundaries delineating normal everyday life and what counts as an event are problematic. In many contexts, perhaps especially in such 'warscapes', which these authors define as places where violent events and instability have 'become the norm' (318), the distinction between the event and the everyday is difficult to clearly define (see also Das 2007 and Trentmann 2009). My ethnographic examples suggest that, similarly to Zigon's informants, Kulob residents do attempt to return to something they consider to be normality, and to navigate the event, in many cases disastrous events, towards ordinariness. However, an event is a transforming force that 'shakes' (Hoffman and Lubkemann 2005), if not fully 'erodes' (Badiou 2005; Humphrey 2008) existing knowledge: therefore, the everydayness to which Kulob residents attempt to return is also constantly shifting.

Building on these approaches to the study of the event's relationship to the everyday, I am concerned with the ways in which ordinary life is crafted out of events, and the extent to which the texture of the 'ordinary' in such circumstances also exhibits a changing quality. How are these processes accounted for in contexts where a disaster is not a singular event but instead is conceived as 'an ongoing experience' and a 'result of slow processes of deterioration, erosion and negative change' (Vigh 2008, 8–9)? For many of my informants in Kulob disastrous events (such as floods and campaigns of forced taxation) as well as the expectation of non-development (in the form, for example, of constant electricity blackouts, deficient sources of income, or the absence of resources to treat a life-threatening illness) have become the norm and are experienced as unending stagnation. I suggest that by exploring the specificities of what is considered a 'disaster' (*fojia*) by people in Kulob it is possible to examine the blurred boundaries between extraordinary events and everydayness; to analyse the general sense of stagnation among Kulob residents, and to account for joking and cunning/cheating as some of the most highly valued forms through which people in Kulob attempt to transform catastrophe into more mundane aspects of their everyday lives.

Much of the literature on disasters focuses on how environment, society and technology interplay in complicated ways to produce hazards, danger zones and finally events that, because of their destructive impact on human societies, are called disasters (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999). Another strand of the literature deals with disaster risk management and resilience, or the capacity of socio-ecological systems to absorb shocks through preventive measures to avoid, minimize and cope with disaster impacts (Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013). However, as Béné et al. (2012, 12) point out, 'in much of the debate on resilience and social-ecological

systems, the agency of people is often veiled, focusing instead on the ability of the “system” to recover from shocks’. Therefore, my approach to analysing the flood in Kulob, as well as the campaign to gather funds for the Roghun dam and hydropower station, begins with a different set of theories that critically engage with the social construction of notions of risk. Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) point out that ‘risk’ is a calculative discourse in ‘modern’ societies that has been incorporated into everyday life through attitudes towards consumption, work and health, in order to avoid potentially adverse scenarios. In this calculative framework for analysing disasters, such events are depicted as emerging from natural forces and departing ‘from a state of normalcy to which a society returns to on recovery’ (Bankoff 2003, 11). Risk and catastrophic events, furthermore, are expected to be managed through technocratic and bureaucratic means in order to avoid, reduce and repair the potential damage to human societies. Conversely, in many countries such as Tajikistan the capacities of the government to avoid damage are insufficient, or, as Simpson (2013) suggests in his analysis of the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat, these capacities are captured by private companies and investors that aim to realize profits from projects of prevention, relief and reconstruction.

In his anthropological and historical study of disasters in the Philippines, Bankoff (2003) suggests that people’s constant exposure to disastrous events has led to the normalization of threat. Vigh (2008), in his work on Guinea-Bissau, refers to this type of scenario as ‘crisis as context’, or places where crisis has become the norm: notions of hazard, vulnerability and disaster are, therefore, discursively constructed and culturally disparate in different societies. Vigh warns us, however, that although crisis ‘may become normal’ because of people’s constant exposure to extreme adversities, his informants in Bissau do not remain passive or indifferent to their troubles (11). Instead, Vigh’s acquaintances find ‘terrains of action’ to improve the harsh conditions in which their everyday lives evolve. In other words, as Jackson (2011, ix) suggests in a discussion of the concept of ‘well-being’, the process of normalizing the occurrence of disasters is ‘a field of struggle’ rather than a ‘settled state’. Building on the work of these authors, I suggest that Kulob residents do not see disastrous events and stagnation as ruptures, risks or circumstances that they can prevent and administer. Instead, disasters are often referred to by Kulob residents as ‘normal’. These events are expected to be endured without great complaint, and thus be quickly incorporated into less tragic dimensions of their everyday lives, a process to which creative forms of joking and cunning/cheating are of considerable importance.

The Roghun hydropower station, shortages, debt and other everyday disasters

‘We do not have gas, electricity, [running] water, money or a job – but we have fresh air and clean water!’ This was one of the phrases most commonly repeated to me during my stay in Kulob, often in a tone that mixed joking, pride, and desperation. Tajikistan, the so-called ‘water country’, lacks energy resources, such as oil and gas, that neighbouring countries in Central Asia (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) possess.⁴ Therefore, people throughout the country, including those in the Kulob region, are subjected to daily and seasonal rationing of gas (in the very few areas of the country where it is available), electricity and pumped water. The politics of the provision of utilities was a matter of everyday life, and underpinned people’s routines, especially when they struggled to secure water and to take advantage of the available hours of electricity to fulfil their daily domestic tasks.

In 2010 especially, water was evoked by Tajikistan’s government as ‘the body of the nation’ (Suyarkulova 2014, 376) and the resource that would guarantee Tajikistan’s development. Water would transform the country into a ‘progressive’ nation with a permanent supply of water and electricity to every house and workplace. As Suyarkulova and Féaux de la Croix (forthcoming) suggest, projects concerning energy and hydropower infrastructure were already at the core of the

previous Soviet government. Soviet officials treated such engineering projects as a form of symbolic power that celebrated the conquest of nature by collective human labour, and thus an important step on the road to progress and modernization. The Soviet ‘hydraulic mission’ in Central Asia aimed to increase irrigation for cotton production, as well as generate affordable hydro-energy. It was according to this logic that Tajikistan’s president publicly announced that it was necessary to construct a gigantic dam and hydropower station (HPS) in Roghun.⁵

A Roghun HPS on the Vakhsh River was first proposed by the Soviet regime in 1956, but only started to take shape in 1976, when Soviet engineers intended Roghun to be the highest dam in the world (335 m). However, the dam was never finished, due to a lack of funds, and was abandoned in the late 1970s despite the already relatively advanced state of works that had been undertaken there.⁶ Prior to 2008, the year in which the Tajik government reactivated the project, Tajikistan had already searched for international partners, principally Russia, to assist with the final completion of the dam. However, several Russian investors declined the offer of further involvement in Roghun, since according to the terms of their participation they would not be permitted to hold the majority of shares. According to Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda (an influential former leader of Tajikistan’s Islamic Opposition in the civil war), Pakistan was also interested in investing in the Roghun HPS as early as 1992, yet this plan was opposed by both Russia and Uzbekistan. According to Turajonzoda, the possible involvement of Pakistan in the project and the increasing Pakistani presence and influence in Tajikistan was one of the reasons behind the onset of civil war in 1992 (Canfield and Rasuly-Palczyk 2010). In 1993, the remaining foundations for the dam were destroyed by a flood.

Short of both investors and funds, in 2010 Rahmon launched a large-scale campaign across the country that, as I explore below, theoretically invited (but in practice compelled) most of Tajikistan’s population to buy stock (*sahmiabo*) and thus to invest in the project. In exchange for investing in the construction of the dam, the buyers were issued certificates for their stock in quantities of TJS 100, 200 and 500 (equivalent to USD 21, 42 and 105). The official media played an important role in the campaign to raise funds for the Roghun HPS. The authorizing discourse of the campaign was based on depictions of Tajikistan’s present as unsustainable because its existing hydropower stations are insufficient for the country’s present energy needs; therefore Tajikistan’s people suffer daily and seasonal electricity rationing and constant blackouts. Images of the building site in Roghun, decorated with the national flag, the words ‘nation’ and ‘motherland’, and the serious and resolute face of the president beneath a helmet were commonly displayed, not just on television but also on advertising hoardings across the country.⁷ Rahmon argued that the Roghun HPS was vital to Tajikistan’s strivings to become self-sufficient in energy terms. He even conjectured that, in the future, Roghun would make the country an exporter of electricity; the profits would bring astounding prosperity to the nation.

The economic impacts of the campaign, however, were felt by many individuals and families for several years. At the time of my research, the average pension and monthly salary in Kulob ranged from TJS 70 to 120 (USD 14.70 to 25.20). Aka Daler was a man in his sixties who was about to retire from his ‘well-paid’ job in the local council. Aka Daler’s monthly income was TJS 300 TJS (USD 64), and although he was the only person earning an income in his family, he was ‘invited’ by state officials, or as Aka Daler himself put it, ‘compelled’ (*majbur*), to buy TJS 4000 (USD 840.60) in stock. The full impact of this financial outlay on the well-being of Aka Daler’s family is more clearly recognized when considered in relation to his annual salary of TJS 3600 (USD 756.50). Aka Daler had to take a high-interest loan from a national bank to pay for the stock, and he remained in debt for more than two years as a direct result of the campaign to build Roghun. Furthermore, it delayed his plans of becoming a pensioner. All of Aka Daler’s work colleagues (*hamkorho*) faced the same or similar conditions: if they did not buy stock,

their superiors told them, they would lose their job. Another worker, also employed in a relatively stable job in a respectable government office, made the following remarks to me:

We were told that if we want to have Tajikistan with electricity and running water in the future, and working industries and productive factories for our children, we have to make an effort to buy that stock. I agree. We have to do something good for our country. We cannot live eternally on remittances and our youngsters cannot live eternally in Russia.

Although the majority of the working people with whom I spoke shared this man's point of view, they also argued that the price of the stock, the pressure that the government placed on people to buy it, and their general degree of impoverishment did not logically meld with the Roghun HPS project.

In a comparative analysis of building dams and roads in Jimma, Ethiopia, Mains (2012) argues that it is through these projects that his informants keep believing in 'progressive narratives and a developmentalist state' even though in many cases such projects are never completed. Similarly, Kulob residents, especially students in college and university, expressed to me a feeling of being enchanted by the future realization of the dam, or, as Ferguson (1999) puts it, by the 'expectations of modernity'. However, the great majority of my informants, including such youngsters, were less enthusiastic than people in Jimma appear to have been about donating their money to the Roghun cause. In contrast to youngsters in Jimma, Kulob residents were not given jobs by the companies in charge of building Roghun. Actually, most Tajik citizens and non-approved local and foreign journalists were banned from the Roghun region and the specific building site; my informants told me that although the campaign to gather money was national and public, the details of the whole project were a well-kept 'secret' (*mahfi*; Rus. *taina*).⁸

The pervasive secrecy also applied to information about how personal liabilities were calculated and by whom, as well as the actual rules about how many shares an individual should buy and how many times the campaign would be repeated. Seemingly, the shares that workers had to buy correlated to their salaries, but in some workplaces (e.g. universities and schools) students were compelled by their teachers to buy stock to cover the stock of the academic and administrative staff. I also heard reports of nurses and doctors who in addition to the expected fees for their services gave medical attention in exchange for stock. Superiors in each company or workplace were in charge of checking the acquisition of stock by their subordinates, and to report such stock to their superiors. The general means of coercion to force people to buy stock was the threat of losing their jobs, or in the case of independent entrepreneurs, the closure by state officials of their company, shop, or business. Each of the shopkeepers in the bazaar was 'asked' to buy between TJS 200 and 1000 in stock (between USD 42 and 210). Doing so, officials told them, would ensure that their shop remained open. Students were told by their teachers that if they did not buy stock they would not be able to sit their exams, or would be refused enrolment in the following academic year. A woman explained to me that, in this way, teachers 'did cunning':

My son, only eight years old, was requested TJS 10 for stock. He will not receive a certificate, though, because the money is actually for his teacher to buy her own stock. How will my husband manage to buy his own stock, requested by the cotton factory, and then our children's stock for the teacher?

In Kulob, as in the rest of the country, many workers (*korgar*) acquired bank loans (*qarz*) and requested urgent remittances from their relatives working in Russia to help pay for the stock. Some people I spoke to, who largely worked in factories (e.g. Kulob's milk factory) and companies (e.g. mobile phone companies), told me that a proportion of their monthly salary was being deducted to pay for stock, in addition to the loans taken from banks and relatives.

During the campaign to gather funds for Roghun, the economic challenges posed by the construction of such a colossal venture, the levels of indebtedness that Tajikistan's people faced as a result, and the potential failure of the project were entirely absent from official discourses.⁹

However, Tajikistan's government emphasized that if Tajikistan did not become energy self-sufficient, then neighbouring countries would soon begin to take advantage of its vulnerability. Indeed, according to such politicians, Tajikistan's greatest foe, Uzbekistan, was already acting in such a manner. As the Roghun project was being launched, the Uzbek government placed pressure on Tajikistan to stop building the dam. They argued that by blocking the Vakhsh River, which flows through Uzbekistan to the Aral Sea, Tajikistan was almost certain to damage the environment, desiccate important Uzbek agricultural lands, and therefore threaten the 'security' of Uzbekistan's people.¹⁰ Strong measures were taken by Uzbekistan against Tajikistan: Uzbek air space was closed to Tajik aircraft, and the borders through which many basic imported goods (including flour, rice, medicines and cooking oils) arrived in Tajikistan from both Uzbekistan and beyond were sealed to commercial traffic.¹¹ As a direct consequence, prices for petrol (and transport) and basic food products increased in Tajikistan: petrol prices, for example, rose by 40% during the political crisis, eventually reaching TJS 6 (USD 1.20) per litre.

In these difficult economic and political conditions, many of my Kulobi informants remarked to me that they felt 'inspired' by their love for the motherland (*vatan*) and the bright future that Roghun offered Tajikistan. Yet, most of my acquaintances were more concerned with their daily struggle to gather the money to pay for the stock, which people I knew did by cutting back on already insufficient household expenditures. In Kulob, this period of fluctuating prices for basic goods was characterized by a reduction in wedding celebrations (*tũiho*) – the major and most valued form of entertainment and sociality in the region. In those days, many of my informants also told me that they believed that the project would never be completed and the money they had 'invested' in the stock would never be returned to them. In addition, all of this economic uncertainty coincided with the floodwaters that hit and devastated Charamgharo. My informants often explained to me that the reason the flood that hit Kulob should not be called a disaster (*fojia*) was because there were many such events, but that, most importantly, 'The whole situation is a disaster.'

The camp: a spatial model of the blurred boundaries between the disastrous event and everyday life

Three days after the flood, and as the campaign to collect funds for the Roghun HPS continued, an area for those affected by the flood was erected by a variety of organizations in Kulob's stadium, chosen because of its location on higher ground. Tents marked with the symbols of the Red Cross, Oxfam and the UN mushroomed quickly within the stadium. People in areas not directly affected by the flood but whose homes lay near the camp told me that this was the correct procedure to help those in the camp who were left homeless. As days passed, however, my acquaintances from these parts of Kulob began to complain that some of the victims they knew had started to 'do cunning' and to 'invite' their relatives to live in the tents with them. People in the camp had running water, free food (including 'eggs and milk on a daily basis', a standard of nutrition that was seen by many as a luxury), access to instant medical services, free medicines and vaccinations, and even a nursery for their children – the last being an unheard-of marker of opulence that the vast majority of families in Kulob could never afford. On seeing the facilities offered to the camp-dwellers, many concluded that life in the camp was of a higher standard than that outside it: basic services on the outside, they said, were next to nonexistent.

Furthermore, in the unaffected neighbourhoods the everyday shortages of water and electricity I discussed above were being experienced more frequently than before the flood; many pipes and cables had been damaged or destroyed by the floodwaters. Those living inside the camp, however, complained that their situation was in fact no better than ordinary life; many

sat inside their tents and lamented the loss of their relatives, their crops or/and animals, and their houses. Soon afterwards, Tajikistan's president visited the city of Kulob and announced that all victims of the flood in the region would receive a brand-new house for free (*bepul*).

On a daily basis, however, receiving government and international aid was interpreted by many as something that dehumanized those affected by the flood, in the sense that they were fed, enumerated, ordered, registered, watched, rushed and patrolled within the camp by nurses, doctors, police officers and all kind of volunteers. The lack of privacy engendered by this routine became a daily concern for the victims in the stadium. Several people remarked to me, however, that experiencing such forms of surveillance was not such an abnormal aspect of life for them. They said that the movements of all Tajik citizens, with or without a flood or camp, were closely watched and recorded by state officials, on the grounds that doing so kept peace and stability in the country (Heathershaw 2009). At the same time, those outside the camp repeatedly told me that the situation inside the camp was better because those affected by the flood were entitled to donations from NGOs and the gifts of aid and support. After expressing these concerns, I heard on many occasions the phrase, 'We became like animals!' This phrase pointed at the paradoxes of people being fed and looked after, yet also being carefully observed and patrolled by NGO workers and state officials. It was uttered both by those in the tent-camp and those living outside it: the boundaries between what constituted disaster/camp and normalcy/outside-the-camp were far from being straightforward.

Normalizing the disaster: joking and cunning/cheating as involvement

In addition to the debates about the quality of life within and outside the camp, the ways in which many Kulob residents thought about the flood evoked the type of general attitudes they held about everyday life: as a friend of mine told me, life was full of suffering (*azob*), but there was also plenty of time for jolly talking (*chak-chak kardan*). One of my closest friends in Kulob, Shirin, was a young mother of three children who suffered a painful and life-threatening illness. In addition to all her misfortunes, Shirin's cows and chickens had drowned in the flood waters. On the days following the flood, people called her 'poor you' (*bechora*, lit. 'without means'). Emphasizing her agency and resourcefulness, Shirin responded to such people: 'No! [Do not call me] "poor you" [*be-chora*, 'without-means']. We have means! [*chora dorem*]!'

While many in Kulob spoke about the ways in which both their everyday life and experiences in the camp were 'full' of suffering and stagnation, projects of non-development and everyday disasters, Shirin, as well as many others of my friends and informants, were also reluctant to have their personal and collective situation described in one-dimensionally pessimistic terms; indeed, they would often emphasize the high levels of resourcefulness, patience and endurance that Kulob residents demonstrated as they dealt with the recurrent situations they faced. By emphasizing that they had means (*chora*) they also tended to highlight their creativity and wit when dealing with misfortune, and the necessity of being recognized and valued as agentic in the processes affecting their lives.

Despite the loss of human lives, houses and cattle, people living inside the camp rapidly began to reorganize their 'normal' daily activities, such as visiting each other, chatting, jolly talking, sharing experiences of suffering, and, importantly, also joking and cunning/cheating. Joking, I found out during my fieldwork, is one of the most important ways in which people in southern Tajikistan socialize and also deal with misfortune. As the work of Goldstein (2003) on *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro demonstrates, laughing is not only about hilarity or escape but also about displaying resilience and dignity in the face of poverty and hopelessness. Building on Goldstein I suggest that joking and *cholok* (cunning/cheating) were modes through which Kulob residents 'normalized' disastrous events, or, as Das (2007) puts it, a way in which the 'big' events

entered into the realm of the ordinary. Moreover, joking and cunning/cheating also constituted means through which Kulob residents sought to acknowledge their involvement in shaping the conditions of their daily lives. In order to understand the importance of such collective self-reflection, I borrow the term ‘involvement’ from Anderson’s (2013) discussion of everyday narratives that lament or scorn the self among entrepreneurs in Aleppo, Syria. Involvement occurs when the narrator directs ridicule not simply at others but also at the self in order to both criticize adverse circumstances and acknowledge his or her own involvement in such scenarios. Being involved is moving beyond being acknowledged as a powerless victim or as located in a social sphere separated from the state. Rather, involvement implies that narrators are ‘critical and complicit’, and are agents who put themselves on display to laugh and be laughed at. Involvement is significant, Anderson suggests, because ‘it becomes a way of sustaining political life and possibility under authoritarianism or any hegemonic structure’ (476).

In Kulob, many of my informants, including some of those who expressed feelings of sadness and world-weariness (*ziq*) and said they had been destroyed (*vairon*) by the flood, could be found from time to time laughing at events and turns of phrase that they found humorous and that had been uttered by people in a similar situation to their own. For example, shortly after the flood had destroyed her house, I sat with a woman who was crying in her tent, which was in the camp. Soon afterwards, her relatives arrived to visit and comfort her. She sobbed: ‘I lost all my teeth! The water took them away! What a disgrace!’ The other women worried: ‘How? Did a rock hit you? Are you bleeding?’ The woman stopped crying and began laughing loudly: ‘No! I kept my gold teeth in a little box. The water took them away! Can you imagine how many teeth and how much gold were lost with the flood?’ The story made the women roar with laughter, especially because some of them had entertained the idea of imitating their ‘greedy’ (*khasis*) neighbours in their endeavours of searching for gold in the flooded courtyards of other people’s houses. One of these women eventually recognized her involvement: in such a context of misfortune and tragedy, and knowing that corpses of animals and people were still being recovered from the stinking mud, she had gone, with her husband, searching for ‘treasures’ (gems, gold, documents), and had found none. These women then laughed even louder until, with tears in their eyes, one of them told me: ‘I swear to God! Here we laugh a lot about some stories. We laugh, and then we cry.’ Indeed, people in the camp could be found joking and laughing, and minutes afterwards sobbing, as they narrated the tragedies the flood had brought about. Yet, as in the ordinary life of Kulob and the forms of sociality that are important to it, joking in the tents became popular as a daily strategy to cheer oneself and others up and render dramatic misfortune, an unexpected event, into a normal and worthy everyday life.

The other way in which people in Kulob tended to deal with misfortune, to navigate disastrous events towards everydayness and to acknowledge their involvement in experiences of stagnation was ‘cheating’ or ‘cunning’ – actions described to me as *cholak*, *zirak* and *fireb kardan*, all terms that might refer to astuteness or cheating, or a mixture of both.

A builder who volunteered to distribute aid to those affected by the flood bitterly complained to me that:

There are people who were not affected and are not suffering any loss. Nevertheless, they take lots of the parcels of aid. One day I saw one of them and told him: ‘You are not afraid of God! I swear to God that I saw your house and not even a drop of water entered it!’ But people who are *cholak* and want to take advantage of the situation just do it.

Another man, who had worked as a volunteer during the height of the ‘disaster’, told me that people in Tajikistan were ‘cheaters’ (Rus. *moshenniki*) and that it was not difficult to realize that everybody, including him, wanted to cheat the government, the ‘uncles’ (patrons) and whomever

else could be cheated in order to take advantage of this situation and many others that they faced on a daily basis. He illustrated his point with this story:

People cheat! We went to deliver aid from my local mosque to the [affected] neighbourhood. One young man requested two parcels of aid from us, so he could deliver one to his father, who lived next door but who was not present at that moment. Later on his father arrived and angrily told us: 'Why did you give my parcel to my son? The bastard will never give it to me!' You see? People cheat even their own father.

These stories demonstrate that people think everyday social relations are fully implicated in the context of disaster: networks of trust and kinship are seen not only as a source of support to be called upon in times of good and bad but also as potential founts of danger. It is important to emphasize here that my argument is not that Kulob residents or government officials are 'liars' or 'cheaters' but that this is an ironic self-recognition similar to what Hertzfeld (2004) calls 'cultural intimacy' and defines as 'those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality' (3).

In addition, these stories reveal aspects of people's agency, wit and creativity in dealing with disasters and the normalcy of non-development in Tajikistan, a state that is characterized by a narrow elite who hold overwhelming political and economic power and who are also currently seeking, with considerable success, to control a vast range of the country's resources, as well as to order, discipline and determine the forms of knowledge that are publicly acceptable. Rasayanayagam, Beyer, and Reeves (2014, 11) advance the question of 'How is the state being done' in Central Asia, and highlight the importance of 'contingency, ambiguity and indeterminacy' as well as the capacity of reflection of those involved in performing politics in the region. By acknowledging that the experience of *kasodi* or stagnation and the actual normalcy of non-development are also manifested as cunning/cheating, and that Kulob residents as narrators are involved in such practices, I suggest that my informants in Kulob are bringing these topics to 'public discussion' in a manner that enacts 'involvement' and demands 'witnessing', regardless of the fact that their involvement can be evaluated as greedy or helpless practices that replicate 'economic and political marginalisation' (Anderson 2013, 477).

The evaluations of good and bad forms of cunning are made by Kulob residents in terms of empathy towards others, piety and religion, and also in more pragmatic ways: cunning/cheating is regarded, given the circumstances of daily life, as being, at times, a morally neutral way of achieving goals. The campaigns of forced taxation to invest in the Roghun HPS or to build the promised new houses for those affected by the flood in Kulob (as I will discuss below) were also seen as 'cunning' by many of my informants, insofar as they were convinced that some of the 'donated' money would end up in the pockets of corrupt officials. However, this cunning/cheating was reflected not only in the mischievousness (*fasod*) of the government's officials but also in the ways in which 'everybody' (*hama*), as they put it, is part of a society where cunning/cheating, even towards one's own father, is one of the ways people deal with everyday disasters and misfortune whilst attempting to be recognized as social and moral persons who are 'not simply oppressed by circumstances, but tainted or changed by them' (Anderson 2013, 477). In this sense, cunning/cheating was also evaluated as an aspect that perpetuated experiences of *kasodi* or stagnation. Many people in Kulob were aware that the distinction between an appropriating elite and a class of marginalized subalterns did little to illuminate the complexity of their daily struggles. After all, in these stories, the victims of cunning/cheating include one's own father, a government that pretends to provide aid parcels and worthy 'free' houses for those affected by the flood, and the 'astute' people who were not affected by the flood yet who attempted by all means available to them to take one of the aid parcels or even one of the promised new houses, and by doing so, cheat the government.

Kulob's reconstruction and the future of Roghun: disaster as context

In other areas of Tajikistan people experienced the pressure of having 'to help Kulob' after the flood. The so-called ordinary people (who never appeared publicly as 'donors') were also 'requested' (compelled) to bring money to their local councils to help build the promised new houses for those affected by the flood. Newspapers reported that government officials were busy collecting these 'donations', but at the same time, the governor (*rais*) of one of Khatlon's districts told me that the money to build these new houses was forcibly taken, in the form of 'charity' or 'voluntary aid', from private companies, banks, governmental offices and ministers. The money taken from institutions such as these was then deducted directly in many cases (though not in all) from the wages of the workers; and this deduction was in addition to the one taken for the Roghun HPS. In this respect, the frequent 'donations' became to be seen by the great majority of people to whom I spoke in Tajikistan as everyday disasters and as a direct cause of their non-development, rather than as an investment in projects that would assure Tajikistan's progress and simultaneously some improvement in their general well-being.

By the end of 2010, the delays that the Roghun project had encountered added to the general sense of *kasodi* or stagnation among my informants in Kulob. The dam will not be finished unless an international techno-economic assessment requested by the IMF and the World Bank brings positive results. This was supposed to be completed in 2013, but its completion has been delayed. Meanwhile, the money gathered in the campaign apparently remains in a Tajik bank controlled by the government. In January 2013 and in August 2015, people in Kulob told me that they had been informed that the Roghun HPS was in the process of being built – this time with Russian companies as major investors and stakeholders.¹² However, when I asked them what had happened to their stock, they replied that it was 'useless' (*befoida*) and that all the people in Tajikistan who invested in the project have been cheated. Some of my friends even gave me up to USD 400 of their printed shares as 'souvenirs', describing them, in an ironic tone, as useless 'rubbish'. The previous statement, that Tajikistan was not self-sufficient in energy terms, was also contested by many of my acquaintances. Some of my informants told me that, as far as they knew, Tajikistan was already exporting electricity to China and Afghanistan. While still laughing at a joke concerning blackouts, one of my informants told me: 'We sit in the dark, while *they* export electricity to Afghanistan.' Although the Roghun HPS has not been completed, Tajikistan began to export electricity to Afghanistan in 2011 from the Sangtuda HPS on the Vakhsh River.¹³

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to advance the notion of 'everyday disasters' to explain firstly, the imprecise boundaries between catastrophic events and daily lives as reported by Kulob residents; and secondly, the ways these events' negative effects were experienced by them as a form of stagnation. Instead of assuming the Roghun HPS or Kulob's reconstruction as projects that would assure Tajikistan's development or an improvement in people's well-being, the flood, the campaigns of forced taxation and the constant exposure to 'everyday disasters' were seen by Kulob residents as direct causes of non-development of life in their hometown.

From this point of view, 'everyday disasters' are seen as buttressed not only by so-called natural disasters but also, as Farmer (2005) puts it, by a combination of social, political and institutional arrangements that cause injury to individuals and societies, or the structural violence in which my informants' daily lives are encompassed. In theory, policies of social development focus on improving the well-being of every individual in society, so they are treated with dignity and justice, with the aim of facilitating their full potential as citizens and human beings. My informants in southern Tajikistan explained to me that they expected the contrary:

non-development amid structural violence. They conveyed to me a common sense of stagnation in the already deprived conditions surrounding their everyday lives.

I have also sought to demonstrate the importance that Kulob residents place on joking and cunning/cheating as means to endure and circumnavigate disastrous events towards everydayness even if cunning/cheating is, at times, evaluated as a factor replicating experiences of stagnation. The everydayness to which they aim to return has also been transformed by the occurrence of disasters such as floods and constant campaigns of forced taxation, yet, through displaying humour and wit, Kulob residents attempt to be recognized and valued, and to create a dimension of individual and communal routines that are less hectic and painful, and thus to render daily life more pleasant. Furthermore, joking and cunning/cheating emphasize Kulob residents' acknowledgement of their involvement in the disaster as the context in which their everyday lives evolve, and bring these topics to public discussion. Thus, my informants aim to present themselves not straightforwardly as either moral champions or amoral cheaters, pitiful victims of floods or of structural violence, or passive objects of the state or the economic crisis that are beyond the scope of their agency.

Finally, it is important that we do not understand Kulob residents' daily struggles as coping or survival strategies that would simply come to an end once the tragedy has passed. Precisely because the context of *fojia* or disaster is a 'field of struggle' (Jackson 2011) spoken about as constant, my informants put their struggles not in terms of 'surviving' but in terms of 'living' (*zindagi kardan*) with whatever means (*chora*) they have at hand – those being a disposition towards piety, patience and endurance, the creativity of joking, the venture of cunning/cheating, or even all these means at the same time, regardless of the fact that cunning/cheating and embracing acts of piety such as delivering aid to others seem to lie at opposite ends of the spectrum of moral possibilities. Thus, although Kulob residents seemed overwhelmed by their adverse circumstances, by the unwanted outcomes of their courses of action and by the paradoxical combination of expected stagnation and the contingency of catastrophic events that underpinned their daily lives, through joking and cunning they displayed their endurance and wit, which also allowed them to create and sustain their humanity and to pursue a life worthy of being lived. After all, as my friend Shirin often told me until her death: 'We do have means.'

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Notes

1. In Kulob, most people communicated with me in Tajik and/or Russian. In this text, most transliterations in brackets are in Tajik. When Russian was deployed by my informants, the abbreviation 'Rus.' precedes the transliteration.

2. The main method to gather data for this article was participant observation (2009–2013). In the aftermath of the flood, I also carried out unstructured and open-ended interviews with families affected by the flood. Some of these families were temporarily living in the emergency tent-camp. I also interviewed people who had not been directly affected by the flood but were struggling to collect funds for the Roghun HPS.
3. Robbins (2013, 457) clarifies that the anthropology of the good does not seek ‘to define what universally counts as “good”, but to explore the different ways people organize their personal and collective lives in order to foster what they think of as good, and to study what it is like to live at least some of the time in light of such a project’.
4. In 2010, ‘Tajikistan is a water country’ was one of the slogans used by the Tajik government to present the country internationally. Tajikistan hosts nearly 1300 lakes, occupying 705 km².
5. Similarly to Tajikistan’s case, in her work on Kyrgyzstan, Féaux de La Croix (2011) suggests that water and dams are two of the most powerful representations of cleanliness, modernity and progress.
6. For an analysis of technical data on major dams in Central Asia, including Roghun, see Wegerich (2011).
7. Ferry and Mandana (2008) link state-led representations and management of resources (including water to produce electricity) to the project of building a nation-state insofar as this relation concerns notions of sovereignty, economic and social hardship, and achievement.
8. The villages surrounding Roghun were relocated, and access to the site and the wider region was banned, even for journalists (Ergasheva 2012; Suyarkulova 2014).
9. Some analysts consider that the construction of Roghun might ‘take over 50% of Tajikistan’s GDP’ (Marat 2010). To provide a clearer notion of how unviable the Roghun project was (not only because it could take 50% of the country’s GDP) it is important to note that, according to Danzer and Oleksiy (2010) and Kumo (2012), remittances constituted nearly 50% of Tajikistan’s GDP in 2008.
10. For a detailed analysis of water resources in Central Asia and multilateral agreements on water allocation, see Laldjebaev (2010) and Wegerich (2011).
11. For a more detailed analysis of the ways in which Central Asia is exposed to price fluctuations, see Özcan (2010). For an analysis of trade routes of basic goods to Tajikistan from abroad, see Marsden (2015).
12. For a summary of the latest assessment of the Roghun project by the World Bank (July 2014), see Bisenov (2014).
13. Tajikistan’s Ministry of Economic Development reported in February 2014 that the country exported 41 million kWh to Afghanistan. For more details about electricity exports from and blackouts within Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, see ‘Tajikistan exporting electricity during winter blackouts’ (2014).

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