Book Discussion

Sophie Roche, Domesticating Youth: Youth Bulges and their Socio-political Implications in Tajikistan (New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2014)

The Tajik Youth Bulge: Action or Agency?

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In this thought-provoking study, Sophie Roche explores youth bulges as sources of conflict in the case of Tajikistan. In doing so she focuses on young males, since it is young males that are implicated in the literature on youth bulges and violence. At the same time, Roche moves to problematize this relationship, suggesting that the conceptualization of “youth” in such theoretical work is too imprecise and removed from actual practice. Instead she wishes to examine local constructions of youth, together with the subjective “roles, values, and expectations of youth” themselves (61). By making this move Roche is able to treat the phenomenon of youth bulge not simply as an objective demographic fact, but rather as “a group of people who can be mobilized or who can exert pressure on a political regime and older generations” (57). In addition, as indicated by the title, a central organizing theme of the book is “domestication,” understood as “the ways in which authority views and deals with youth” (18). Domestication thus functions partly as a social mechanism for managing sources of conflict, and in this respect it serves as a disciplinary force acting on potentially unruly youth. These preliminary framing steps are quite productive in setting the stage for a fascinating ethnographic inquiry.

Domesticating Youth is based on extensive fieldwork, mainly conducted in rural areas in the Qarotegin (Rasht) Valley and Khatlon province, in addition to Dushanbe. It also consists partly of demographic research into local fertility rates, mortality rates, and the size of the actual youth bulge. As Roche demonstrates, the Tajik youth bulge emerged due to a shift from high fertility in the 1980s to low fertility following the Soviet collapse. As such it has been situated in the context of economic crisis and an accompanying dearth of opportunities for young people, which, in turn, accentuates the possibility of mass frustration and violence. Against this demographic background Roche considers various
domestication efforts and outcomes, including categorizations of youth, family relations, life-cycle stages, marriage, the influence of outside ideas (via migration and global Islam), and state socialization. Along the way she repeatedly touches on the idea that youth must be understood as active subjects, who are potentially able to form “vanguard groups” in order to galvanize social and political change.

Chapter 2 focuses on the historical emergence and redrawing of youth categories, understood as a form of domestication based on a top-down construction of ideal values and roles. An example is the Komsomol, which brought about a drastic transformation of categories intended to crystallize a new identity of youth as the vanguard of communism. After the fall of the USSR in 1991, the civil war reshaped categorizations of youth—and thereby enlarged the youth bulge—through “redefinitions of youthfulness,” whereby all males between the ages of 14 and 33 were designated as fighters. In addition to surveying such broad constructions of youth, Roche also examines contrasting social explanations for why youth participated in the civil war, ranging from “victimization” to “troublemaking” to youth as “actors” motivated by such concerns as “solidarity, revenge, ideology, hunger, longing for power and defending one’s honor” (90). Alas, what we do not learn is whether any of these explanations capture the subjective reality on the part of youth participants themselves. As a result, it is hard to say if youth have conscious, purposive agency.

Siblingship and the developmental cycle are considered in Chapter 3 as providing structural foundations for domestication. Moving into his own household thus “represents the son’s successful domestication.” This is desired by the son as a way of establishing his status (except for the youngest son, who remains in the family compound), and is also desired by the father, who thereby fulfills his paternal duty (109–110). Yet while highly desirable, moving out is not always feasible. As Roche explains, it depends on the availability of land as well as employment prospects, which vary considerably across regions and over time. Brothers therefore unavoidably compete for resources. Here we have another link to the concept of youth bulge, as Roche examines the notion that when too many sons compete for limited resources, warfare offers a logical solution on both the macro and micro levels.

In fact, as she contends, the reality on the ground is still more complex, since it includes additional constructs and mechanisms. Unlike in the West, Roche observes that in Tajikistan brothers (and siblings in general) are socially constructed as unified and stabilizing (113–114). Yet this is obviously a contested construct, since she also recounts frequently witnessing overt conflict in one family, as brothers “seemed to resist their prescribed positions within the family as much as possible” (117). Indeed, Roche claims that elder brothers have acquired increased power and influence over their siblings (123). At the same