

Exceptional Pashtuns?
Class Politics, Imperialism and Historiography

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Distanced, top-down political analyses dominate the recent literature on the Taliban, while much of Middle East social science writing has focused on ethnicity or tribalism or been imbued with Islamophobia. This work diverts attention from the old story of imperial over-reach in three ways. First, Pashtuns are made to seem exceptional and incomparable; second, class analyses disappear; and thirdly, a coherent theory of imperial competition is hidden by the powerful discourse of the ‘war on terror’. Yet to understand the anthropology of Swat and the Taliban resistance in Swat and Afghanistan, it is important to return to questions of class, and to what Asad has called ‘ethnographies of imperial hegemony’¹ via attention to the lives of ordinary people, understood holistically, and in intimate, complex detail.²

¹ Talal Asad, ‘Afterword: From the History of Colonial Anthropology to the Anthropology of Western Hegemony’, in George W. Stocking Jr. (ed) *Colonial Situation: Essays on the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge, History of Anthropology*, 7. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991, pp. 314-324.

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Anthropology and the Middle East

The ethnography of the Middle East³, compared with that of other regions, has always been rather poor. By 1995 Lindholm went so far as to describe Middle Eastern ethnography as in 'deep crisis'.⁴ Historians of the Middle East, political scientists and investigative journalists, all seem to cope rather better, probably because, unlike anthropologists, they are not professionally committed, as anthropologists are, to analyses from below.⁵

One problem for anthropologists is that the old imperial politics of the Cold War, and the new imperial politics between China and India and the US are not remote from the field. Oil and strategic geography bring imperialism very close to people's everyday lives - and so to the very stuff of ethnographic descriptions. Folk models of the region are about local groups, but also about class, money, land, local tyranny, state power and imperialism - all of them understood in quite secular terms. Should anthropologists give accurate ethnographic accounts of how ordinary Middle Easterners see the world, they are likely to end up writing sophisticated, radical critiques of Western European and American imperialism.

of this paper. I thank especially Jonathan Neale for his support and wisdom as we have struggled to understand the Afghan tragedy.

³ There has been much debate about where Afghanistan and Pakistan fit into area anthropologies of the Middle East, Muslim southwest Asia and/or Central Asia and of Islam. This discussion is symptomatic of some of the problems I address here (see p. 13 below).

⁴ Charles Lindholm, 'The New Middle Eastern Ethnography', *Journal Royal Anthropological Institute*, 1/4, 1995, pp. 805-820, cf. 805, 812, 817.

⁵ Part of this difference is disciplinary. History is about the past: an historian's work can be discounted if it challenges current hegemonies, and most informants are beyond temporal punishment. Moreover, most historians, and other scholars, write of elites and public figures. This, and a range of writing conventions, affords them and their sources a degree of protection. And there is an expectation that such accounts will be polemical.

For many anthropologists, this is just too near the bone. So they have tended to focus on the topics which seem ‘to belong’ to the discipline. This has made ‘tribes’, ‘sects’ and ‘ethnic groups’ disproportionately important. Others are rightly concerned about what it is safe to say without bringing harm to informants. Or they worry about being thrown out of the field, or difficulties getting published or finding an academic job.

Certainly, there is a deep reluctance among many anthropologists to acknowledge their personal politics as an integral part of their theories and ethnographies.⁶ In part, this is because, as professionals, anthropologists are expected to be politically agnostic: a holistic approach is the *sine qua non* of the discipline, while cultural relativism, in its weak form, is a source of much-vaunted disciplinary pride. But equally, such radical local critiques are likely to impinge closely on the anthropologist’s own politics and class position at home. These contradictions leave anthropologists in an awkward spot and prone to dissembling. In the case of Afghanistan, in recent decades this tension has been particularly acute.⁷

There is, of course, a tradition of resistance in the Middle East, but it results in few academic publications which take an oppositional

⁶ Compare Heidi Armbuster and Anna Laerke (eds), *Taking Sides: Ethnics, Politics and Fieldwork in Anthropology*, Oxford: Berghahn, 2008; Alisse Waterston and Maria D. Verperi (eds), *Anthropology off the Shelf: Anthropologists on Writing*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009 and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, ‘Making Anthropology Public’, *Anthropology Today*, 25/4, 2009, pp. 1-2.

⁷ Compare Ashraf Ghani, ‘Impact of Foreign Aid on Relations Between State and Society’ & ‘The Future of the Past’, International Seminar on Social and Cultural Prospects for Afghanistan, *Journal of Afghan Affairs*, WUFA: Writers Union of Free Afghanistan, Association of Professors of Universities of Afghanistan, Peshawar., 5/4, Special Issue, Oct-Dec. 1990, pp. 115-133, 155-190 with Asraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World*, Oxford: University Press, 2009 and Ghani, this volume. Also see, for example, Antonio Guistozzi’s coy and confusing note on the Sandanistas of Nicaragua in *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan*, London: Hurst, 2009b, p. 301, n.1.

stance.⁸ This means anthropologists too can find themselves isolated, at which point speaking truth to power becomes not just fraught but frightening. By comparison, managing the relation between folk models, local politics and the anthropologist's personal politics is much easier for foreign and Indian anthropologists writing on India. This is because India is a democracy, with a strong radical tradition of opposition, among intellectuals certainly, but more importantly in the popular politics of the unions, communist parties, Dalits, Adivasis and others. Or, consider Latin America, where local folk models often are, as amongst Afghans, remarkably clear-sighted about material wealth and political control. In both India and Latin America there is an established academic, and often explicitly Marxist, left, and both foreign and local anthropologists have consistently produced vibrant, challenging ethnographies. These examples suggest that in the Middle East there is less space, and far less tolerance, for critiques of state power from below.

Another problem lies in the history of the discipline. Early anthropologists were concerned to demonstrate ethnographically that the 'natives' were fully human 'like us', and the disciplinary disposition remains. Anthropologists continue to focus on difference, then use comparison to reconcile differences into sameness. However, if such efforts are to be useful today, they need to go beyond what was apparently exotic (kinship systems, witchcraft and the Kula) and instead consider those people, such as Islamists and the Taliban, whose beliefs and practices are now at best treated as exotic, and at worst demonized and to be suppressed. But to explain the Taliban in terms of what they say and do requires anthropologists to engage with

⁸ There are exceptions which prove the rule: e.g., the strong oppositional academic literature on Israel/Palestine, and on Iran, mostly written in exile. On Afghanistan and Pakistan, see, for instance, Aijaz Ahmed, *Iraq, Afghanistan and the Imperialism of Our Time*. New Delhi: Left Word, 2004 and Tariq Ali 'The Perils of Islamophobia', Recorded talk, *Marxism 2010: Ideas to Change the World*, 2 July 2010.

the explicitly political debates of the world we all share. Otherwise anthropology risks irrelevance and is emptied of credible intellectual or moral content.⁹

Because of the disciplinary commitment to understanding the lives of ordinary people, it is likely that today a majority of anthropologists are left-leaning. This is clear from the collective outcry from the profession against an association between anthropology and the Human Terrain Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan¹⁰, but it is certainly not inevitable. Anthropologists come in all political stripes and whatever their politics, as anthropologists, they don't necessarily have cogent or compelling explanations of the global economic and political systems that are more accurate, or moral, than other, competing explanations. This leaves many anthropologists confused about taking sides. So they often ignore issues of class and empire, which have implications for their own professional and private lives, while losing themselves in explorations of difference - as construed in exotic tribal, ethnic, sectarian, cultural and gendered terms.

⁹ Cf. Carolyn Nordstrom's brave, wide-ranging anthropology of war, *Shadows of War: Violence, Power and International Profiteering in the Twenty First Century*. Berkeley: University of California, 2004. The case of the Taliban resistance is in some ways comparable to that of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the 1960s, when few anthropologists dared face the tyranny of empire then or afterwards. See David Anderson *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005 and Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. New York: Henry Holt Elkins, 2005.

¹⁰ David Price, 'Past Wars, Present Dangers, Future Anthropologies', *Anthropology Today*, 18/1, 2002, pp. 3-5; Robert J. González, Robert J., 'Human Terrain': Past, Present and Future Applications', *Anthropology Today*, 24/1, 2008, pp. 21-26; M. McFate, M. and S. Fondacaro, 'Cultural Knowledge and Common Sense. A Response to González in this Issue', *Anthropology Today*, 24/1, 2008, p. 27; Robert Albro, 'Anthropology and the Military: AFRICOM, 'Culture' and the Future of Human Terrain Analysis', *Anthropology Today*, 26/1, 2010, pp. 22-24; cf. Robert Young Pelton, 'The New War for Hearts and Minds', *Men's Journal*, 18/3, 2009, 78-83, 98.

Class Analyses and Resistance to Imperialism

While virtually every anthropologist writing on Afghanistan mentions the ‘Great Game’, for most, it is a blocking metaphor, one which seems to say it all and thus stifles further inquiry. Beyond the problems of taking sides, studies which marry theories of imperialism with ethnography are quite rare, compared with those with an historical bias.¹¹ The cross-disciplinary skills and confidence needed to bridge seemingly incommensurate differences of scale are daunting. But there is also a confusion whereby colonialism and imperialism are treated as synonymous. Yet clearly a study about social relations in a settlement occupied for economic gain differs fundamentally from one which investigates how the global economic system impacts on the lives of ordinary people around the world. Colonialism is just one aspect of an imperial system, and studies can reproduce an exoticizing distance between the metropolitan rich and the far-flung poor. Theorizing imperialism obliges the student to consider the nexus of global inequality in causal terms.

Both right and left wing theories of imperialism owe a considerable debt to early Marxist thinking.¹² Later accounts in their different ways build on three basic ideas which are key to understanding imperialism: centralization, competition and resistance.

¹³ Let me outline them briefly.

¹¹ There are of course admirable exceptions, as mentioned in Note 9.

¹² Nikolai Bukharin, *Imperialism and the World Economy*. London: Bookmarks, 2003; Rosa Luxemburg and Nikolai Bukharin, *Imperialism and the Accumulation of Capital*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971. V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism, Collected Works, XXII*, Moscow: State Publishing House, 1964.

¹³ On these debates, see Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K Gills, (eds), *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1993, and John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1820-1970*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009; for recent Marxist critiques, see David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; Alex Callinicos, *Imperialism and Global Political Economy*, Oxford: Polity, 2009; Gilbert Achcar, ‘Rethinking Imperialism: Past, Present and Future’, *International Socialism*, 126, 2010, pp. 187- 195.

Centralization is fundamental: capital tends towards monopoly and capitalists increasingly turn to the state to further their interests. In this way different sections of the ruling class become intimately intertwined, and with this process comes militarization. The aim is to compete for control of the world economic system, both resources and markets. The growth of the arms industry is part of the same centralization that fuels the war in the Congo, and allows Coke and the dollar to dominate world markets.

However, this process is never straightforward because of competition between rival centres of capital accumulation. Rivalries between major powers resulted in the devastation of the First and Second World Wars. Then the Cold War between the US and Soviet Union led to the horrors of Vietnam and the Soviet war in Afghanistan. In the last decade rivalry has shifted to that between three centres, the US, the EU and East Asia. To overcome its economic weaknesses in the world setting, the US government has capitalized (literally) on its military ascendancy and systematically militarized economic competition especially for oil and gas. As Giles Dorransoro suggests, 'It could also be asked whether the increasing militarisation of American politics is not primarily a reflection of the relative decline of the United States in the international scene'.¹⁴

In short, there is an intrinsic connection between domestic and foreign policy. A good place to begin understanding resistance to imperial domination is to consider exploitation within each centre of capitalist power as well as between them. This requires a class analysis - that is, a relational understanding of how the interests of the ruling class differ from those of middle and working class people whose labour is the source of profit.

¹⁴ *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan: 1979 to the Present*, London: Hurst, 2005, p. 317, n.12.

In this respect, it is at least as important to understand the American state, economy and society as it is to understand Afghans and Afghanistan. Equally, to make sense of resistance to imperial competitions we need to understand the link between imperial elites and the national elites of even the poorest countries on earth, and the shared conditions and interests of the working women and men in wealthy and poor states alike. We cannot explain the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, foreign fighters in Afghanistan, Stop-the-War demonstrations around the world, protests in the German parliament over the bombing of civilians in Kunduz,¹⁵ the 11,000 British soldiers who have gone AWOL since 2003,¹⁶ or the WikiLeaks revelations,¹⁷ if we don't make connections between imperial and national elites, and the related connections between workers under pressure - whether these workers are college professors, construction workers or soldiers in the US, UK, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

We know about the weapons of the weak.¹⁸ We also know about strikes and demonstrations for social justice, better working conditions and health care. People can also choose other forms of defiance, including non-violent and armed resistance. In the English and French Revolutions, and for the Communists in Afghanistan, the targets were the king and the aristocracy. In other settings, workers and national elites together have fought to end an imperial occupation, as happened in the American Revolution, Congress in India, and as is happening in complex new variations in Afghanistan and Iraq and in during the Arab Spring of 2011.

¹⁵ Christine Buchholz and Jan van Aken, *Afghanistan. Das wahre Gesicht des Krieges*. Berlin: Fraktion Die Linke im Bundestag, 2010.

¹⁶ Joe Glenton, 'Experience: I went to prison for going awol', *The Guardian Weekend*, 14 Aug, 2010, p 10.

¹⁷ Judy Dempsey, 'Afghan leaks add to Europe's doubts', *International Herald Tribune*, 29 July, 2010, p. 3.

¹⁸ James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Unclarity about resistance leads to a confusion that is easily exploited via the dominant discourse of empire today - Islamophobia and the rhetoric of the 'war on terror'. When this happens, Iraqi fighters or the Taliban are portrayed as aberrant, isolated and exceptional. But no war is ever only one-sided. To understand present resistance in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is important to hold onto two different ideas at the same time. Bush, Obama and American imperialism is undoubtedly bad for most people around the world. But so too was the tyranny of Saddam, and the oppression of the Taliban, bad for most of the people of Iraq and Afghanistan. The Taliban are a response to imperial competition, just as the 'war on terror' is a response to Taliban resistance. The relation is best explained in terms of class and the imperial process itself.

How imperial conflicts end depends on imperial competition. Certainly the Karzai government 'exists solely as a consequence of international military and financial aid, the continuation of which depends on considerations beyond the control of Afghans themselves'.¹⁹ It also depends on the character of class struggle at home. Thus the possible success of Taliban is connected to the economic meltdown in Europe and America, its effect on class politics and on public commitment to the war, as well as the class character of the resistance in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Questions of Similarity and Difference

One problem with class analyses of Afghanistan and Pakistan is that there are just not many around. Dorrnsoro argues strongly against interpretations of the political violence in Afghanistan in terms of 'ethnic conflict' as a criterion of analysis which is sometimes taken

¹⁹ Dorrnsoro, op.cit., p. 355.

‘as an alternative paradigm to that presented by Islamism’. He also notes the ‘frequent confusion between the two ideas, with Pashtun being equated with Taliban’.²⁰ González offers a stunning critique of the ‘tribal’ discourse in the US military.²¹ Equally, an anthropological disposition to focus on Pashtuns and ethnicity is misleading, and anything but politically innocent.

As Marcus Banks puts it, ‘ethnicity is constantly produced as an explanation: the reason why the As are slaughtering the Bs, the reason why the Cs are “clannish” or “dirty”, or “unreliable”’.²² Using ‘ethnicity’ as a frame for both description and analysis is tautological, yet the widespread commitment to this circularity suggests that much is at stake. In 1988 Richard Tapper wrote, ‘The description of “ethnic groups” are political acts that create order and facilitate control, whether for academic or for governmental purposes,’²³ to counter the enthusiasm for ethnic mapping among some historians and anthropologists of Iran and Afghanistan. Yet Guistozzi offers us one of these very same, 1988, ethnic maps (2008: 240).²⁴

We are all both different and the same; we all know this. Yet, where differences are marked, more or less strongly, they create and sustain hierarchy. Some people have greater access to and control of resources than others. Such differences may be marked in class terms, or in others which essentialize and divide people by categorizing them in terms of gender, ethnicity and under the guise of ‘fundamentalist’ Islam. As a corollary, the more differences are marked - by choice or imposition - the greater the inequality they serve to hold in place. And

²⁰ *ibid.*: pp. 13-14.

²¹ Robert J. González, ‘Going ‘Tribal’: Notes on Pacification in the 21st Century’, *Anthropology Today*, 25/2, 2009, 15-19.

²² *Ethnicity: Anthropological Construction*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 190.

²³ ‘Ethnicity, Order and Meaning in the Anthropology of Iran and Afghanistan’, J.-P. Digard (ed), *Le Fait Ethnique en Iran et en Afghanistan*, Paris: CNRS, 1988, p. 22.

²⁴ Antonio Guistozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 240.

because competition fuels capitalist imperialism, hierarchy and inequality are everywhere, though not uniformly so.²⁵

Marking sameness increases equality. Some familiar universalizing discourses - which emphasize similarity and downplay difference - are inspired by Islam, others by Christianity. Yet others, including Marxism, derive from Enlightenment accounts of human potential. These last rely on notions of rationality, secularism, human equality and democratic forms of government; they attend to the materiality of human lives. And there is another, unnamed, universalizing discourse which is enormously important in the world. This allows people all around the world to shrug and say: 'There are good people and bad people, all kinds of people everywhere, but in the end, we are all human beings'. This offers scope for great decency in human relations.²⁶

The universalizing discourses share much history and common ground. Because they emphasize sameness and can appeal to the majority of the people at any one time and place, they are powerful ways to contest authority and confront power. In major confrontations, the balance of forces between popular opposition and elite power determines the outcome: in electoral contests, social movements, civil wars and revolutions. How you judge the outcome - as progressive or conservative - depends on whose side you are on.

The tensions and contradictions between universal ideals and marked inequalities are everywhere the stuff of everyday life. In the 1970s, Durrani Pashtuns of northwestern Afghanistan cared greatly that as tribespeople and Muslims they were all equal. Yet their

²⁵ Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett offer an unequivocal demonstration of how inequality harms not only the poor, but the vast majority (*The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, London: Allen Lane, 2009). However, their statistics relate to citizens of single states, yet the argument also has global implications. For example, the gross inequalities introduced by the occupation and the rich expatriate community in Afghanistan give impetus to both the egalitarian discourse of Islamist resistance and anti-war sentiment in Euro-America.

²⁶ Cf. Marsden, this volume.

egalitarian ideals were contradicted daily as they sought to survive in an increasingly competitive environment in which notions of ethnicity and tribe became more marked to legitimize growing feudal and class inequality.²⁷

As I argue below, the Taliban combine Islamist ideals and class politics to emphasize egalitarian feeling and mobilize support. In the brief for *Decoding the New Taliban*,²⁸ contributors were asked to describe the Taliban as a new social movement. This required attention to the internal dynamics of the movement: to ‘command and control’ structures, negotiation, compromise and how unity is sustained, personally, institutionally and ideologically. The book asks how people do, or do not, manage to work together to effect change in the world. Yet so too people can be sold out and endlessly betrayed by others at the top, leaving no trust and no ideals untarnished. Panjshiri entrepreneurs understand this very well: ‘all this talk of Taliban and al-Qaida is senseless. Afghanistan is today made up of two types of al-Qaida: the *al-guida* [the fucked] and the *al-fida* [the seekers of profit]’.²⁹ A class analysis if ever I heard one!

And there is one similarity that unseats all the accounts of difference. If the US, UK or France were invaded and occupied, we would all hope we had the courage to follow whichever leaders, and join whatever organization, were consistently fighting the occupation. American revolutionaries, the French Resistance, the Viet Cong and SWAPO all fought to end imperial occupations. In this the Taliban are just like ‘us’ in their struggle against occupation. However, to deny

²⁷ Nancy Tapper, ‘Direct Exchange and Brideprice: Alternative Forms in a Complex Marriage System,’ *Man* (NS), 16, 1981, 387-407; Nancy Tapper, *Bartered Brides: Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society*. Cambridge: University Press, 1991.

²⁸ Antonio Guistozzi (ed) *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

²⁹ Magnus Marsden, ‘Talking the Talk: Debating Debate in Northern Afghanistan’, *Anthropology Today*, 25/2, 2009, 20-24, p. 22.

the normalcy of violent resistance, imperial spin exoticizes ‘cultural’ differences.³⁰

Why the Emphasis on Difference?

The pull to treat social relations in terms of difference is very strong. So strong that it is easy to forget that analyses in terms of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘identity politics’ are new. They grew out of uneasy compromises between the American elite and the leadership of the radical social movements of the 1960s,³¹ when divide and rule politics were used to tame the movements for civil rights, peace and women’s liberation. And it wasn’t long before the also new fashion for postmodernism began to dominate the social sciences and a third overlapping discourse of alterity (and the ideas of ‘self and other’) gained credence. By the 1980s, this new ideology, with its divisive ways of describing sociality, swept all before it.

In effect a previously strong movement for equal rights and human liberation was fragmented into hyphenated minorities like African-Americans, and competing interest groups, such as ‘women’ and ‘gays’, thus greatly weakened class politics in the United States.³² The process was shrewd and worked through co-option. The American establishment admitted a few - often only the top tenth - of blacks, Latinos and women to their number, while the lives of other blacks, Latinos and women became significantly harder. As Gary Younge

³⁰ Jonathan Neale, ‘Afghanistan: the Case Against the “Good War”’, *International Socialism*, 2008, 120, 2008, pp. 31-60.

³¹ Cf. Banks op.cit., pp. 32-33, passim.

³² Along with the new ideology came other assaults on class politics in the economic downturn of the 1970s and 1980s. Thatcher broke the miners’ union, so too the American government systematically attacked the unions. Elsewhere too class analyses are discredited. For example, anti-Stalinist critiques of dictatorship in the Soviet empire or Cuba often slide into right-wing critiques of Marxism as a whole.

suggests, 'Black presidents and women MPs do not alone mean equality and justice'.³³

The radical legacy of the 1960s made overt racism and sexism illegal and ensured that US did not dare invade another country for more than twenty years (if you don't count Grenada and Panama). Yet because notions of ethnicity and identity politics hide class relations and confuse many who would oppose elite power, in most respects the divide and rule strategy has worked for the elite.

This new strategy has had imperial as well as domestic implications. American imperialism was developed in Latin America as a system of indirect domination, not direct colonization. For 150 years, US foreign policy had been versatile, and forwarded US imperial interests economically. It was generalized after 1945. In the Middle East, the American government sought control in Saudi Arabia via Aramco and military aid, supported right-wing dictators in Iran and Pakistan and funded the Israeli state, while opposing Cold War enemies like Syria and competing with the Soviet Union to give development aid to Afghanistan.

Then after the shocks of the Islamic revolution in Iran and the communist revolution in Afghanistan, there was a noticeable shift to add the new US domestic ideology of divide and rule to foreign policy - a strategy that had not been used previously in Latin America. This was evident in the sinister play between Sunni and Shi'ite in US support of Saddam's Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war, and in their support of the Pashtun mujahidin in Afghanistan.

Under Clinton, the rhetoric of division, including ethnicity, sectarianism and nationalism, became even more marked during the Balkan wars. As Syrians joked at the time: 'Last week President Clinton was very angry and told the Serbs if they didn't behave, he'd

³³ *The Guardian*, 15 March 2010, p. 27.

bomb Saddam Hussain'.³⁴ In Afghanistan, after the Soviet withdrawal, there was a move towards

an alignment of the distribution of ethnicities and political affiliations on the ground. It should be understood, however, that the ethnicisation of the parties was a consequence of the war. Finally, the focus on ethnicity excluded the consideration of other dynamics, both social and ideological, which were equally significant. The new political equilibrium which had its origin in the American intervention tended to favour a new interpretation of the war as 'ethnic', since this was the only language which the foreign powers understood without difficulty.³⁵

Whereas racism was part and parcel of colonial expansion, since 9/11 Islamophobia has become a dominant discourse of the US and UK and other EU governments. Islamophobia uses 'culture' as a gloss for religious difference marked superficially by beards and veils. Such differences are understood to be unalterable and more than skin deep. They arise from a concatenation of emotion and unreason to include visceral hate and fanatical belief. Islamophobia is a racism which combines colour, ethnicity and religion. Domestically, Islamophobia justifies increased government control over ordinary lives and

³⁴ Nancy Lindisfarne, *Dancing in Damascus: Stories*. Albany: State University of New York, 2000, p. 143.

³⁵ Dorransoro, *op.cit.*, p. 15, cf. Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War and the Future of the Region*. New York: Palgrave, p. 60 ff. Even as senior diplomats, like Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, believe the time has come to discuss a power-sharing government with the Taliban (Richard Norton-Taylor, 'The Wait for Talks to Start', *The Guardian*, 29 June 2010, p. 30; Richard Barrett, 'Taliban Put to the Test', *The Guardian*, 21 July 2010, p. 28), the impetus to divide and rule remains. Karzai has apparently approved a plan for new local militias which the Taliban believe is 'an attempt by the United States to split up Afghanistan ahead of the withdrawal of its troops' (Richard A Opper, Jr. and Taimoor Shah, 'Attack Killed 52, Afghans Report', *International Herald Tribune*, World News Asia, 27 July 2010, p. 6).

scapegoating of the most vulnerable people at home - migrants, refugees and Muslims. Internationally, Islamophobia has become part of the US armory, and Islamists the enemy.

I have written elsewhere about Islamophobia and the gendering of the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.³⁶ A crucial difference is that 'freeing women' remains, for many, an acceptable pretext for the war in Afghanistan. And 'freeing women' is the trope which most effectively exoticizes the Taliban and turns them into barbarous fanatics.

But 'freeing women' was not a credible reason for opening a second front in Iraq, nor for the Israeli war in Lebanon or the bombardment of Gaza. To link all these, Islamophobia has been ramped up and generalized. For instance, the French national debate on veiling gained considerable momentum at the time of the Iraq war. Eight years later the French legislated against fully veiled Muslim women in public places. And, over the same period, the threat of an American or proxy war with Iran grew.³⁷

Case Studies

Following these general remarks, let me now turn the anthropology of Swat as an example of how class and empire disappeared in ethnography of the region, before considering the Taliban resistance in Swat and Afghanistan.

Barth's monograph on Swat, as we all grew up knowing, was based on fieldwork in 1954. However, the thrust of the book is to

³⁶ 'Starting from Below: Fieldwork, Gender and Imperialism Now', *Critique of Anthropology*, 22/4, 2002, pp. 403-423; 2008 'Culture Wars', *Anthropology Today*, 24/3, 2008, pp. 3-4.

³⁷ In a rare admission, Obama's main military advisor said, 'US 'will Attack if Iran Poses Nuclear Threat' (Ed Pilkington, *The Guardian*, 2 Aug 2010, p. 11.

extrapolate back to describe an acephalous political system as it might have been in Swat in the 1920s. As an example of transactional analysis, the book had a considerable theoretical impact, while for a long time it remained one of very few ethnographies of the area.³⁸

Talal Asad's important critique of the book came later.³⁹ Three points from Asad are particularly important here. First, the Yusufzai protagonists of the ethnography make up a small proportion of the population, variously across Swat between one-fifth and one tenth. Moreover, the large landlords, the elite Yusufzai khans, are very few indeed. So Barth's account is top-down. The majority of the peasantry do not get much of a look-in as ethnographic subjects in their own right.⁴⁰ And Barth's account also loses the British.

Secondly, the study offers no cadastral material on Swat, past or present, yet Barth's analysis of Yusufzai power would seem to require a detailed understanding of the system of land tenure and its manipulation.

Third, though Barth certainly understands politics as a relationship between leaders and followers, his transactionalist approach misses the systemic inequalities of, and resistance to, the feudal state. Rather, his discussion individuates landless peasants and tenant farmers, posits a virtually free labour market, and emphasizes

³⁸ Fredrik Barth, *Political leadership among the Swat Pathans*, London: Athlone, 1959a. See also Fredrik Barth, 'Segmentary opposition and the theory of games: a study of Pathan organization', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 89, 1959b, pp. 5-21.

³⁹ 'Market Model, Class Structure and Consent: A Reconsideration of Swat Political Organization', *Man* (NS.) 7/1, 1972, 74-94; cf. Banks, *op.cit.*, p. 13 ff. and especially Akbar S. Ahmed, *Millennium and Charisma among Pathans*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976.

⁴⁰ Barth also divides the peasantry into a timeless hierarchy of 'castes': Pakhtún (landholding tribesman), farmer (zamidār), agricultural labourer (dehqān) (*op.cit.*, 1959a, p. 17). A class analysis would have invited comparison with peasant societies elsewhere instead of making Pakhtuns appear exceptional and it would have better explained Barth's numerous examples of individuals and groups moving between these occupations - thus, 'they used to be herders, but now they are farmers', or 'they were really Pakhtuns, but ate up all their lands, and now they are smiths' (*ibid.*, p. 21)

rational choice to offer a deeply capitalist understanding of peasants who can choose how and when to align themselves with competing khans. His description cries out for a class analysis.⁴¹

Barth reconsidered his Swat material in 1981, acknowledging Asad's critique. In places he seemed to accept that the system he described in Swat 'can be characterized as a structure of agrarian exploitation'.⁴² But he did not otherwise engage with Asad's historical and class interpretation. Perhaps this is not surprising, because by the 1980s the anthropology of the Middle East had taken on a very particular shape, in large part because academic fashion mostly follows and reinforces dominant political trends.

By this time the idea of Area Studies, driven by American policy considerations, had penetrated the academy. The region - from north Africa to south west Asia - was often framed ethnographically in the west by Ernest Gellner's *Saints of the Atlas*,⁴³ which is rather similar to Barth's description of Swat in the east.

Apart from bits of China, the Middle East is the home of the oldest class societies in the world, yet class analyses and urban studies hardly figured at this time. There were of course exceptions, such as Gilson's study of practised Islam in an urban Cairo. But it is also important to understand the political pressures which for more than twenty years made it difficult for Gilson to write and publish his prior, and much more audacious, study of local and state politics in Lebanon.⁴⁴ Though Edward Said's *Orientalism* appeared in 1978,⁴⁵ the imperial competition of the Cold War was hardly mentioned in

⁴¹ Asad also points out that Barth's account also has curious implications for the stereotyping of Pakhtuns and that the 'maleness' of the chiefs, and their aggression, may be artifacts of Barth's agonistic description itself.

⁴² *Features of Person and Society in Swat*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 151.

⁴³ Chicago: University Press, 1969.

⁴⁴ Michael Gilson, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973; *Lords of the Lebanese Marches: Violence, Power and Narrative in an Arab Society*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1995.

⁴⁵ New York: Pantheon.

contemporary ethnographies. Indeed, theories of imperialism were notably absent. Rather, most anthropologists concentrated on making sense of ‘tribalism’ (and its apparently less primitive friend, ‘ethnicity’)⁴⁶ and/or ‘honour and shame’.⁴⁷ Among them were two important critiques of Barth’s Swat, by Akbar Ahmed and Meeker. Of these Ahmed’s is more valuable, not least because it includes an historical account of relations between Swat and the Raj. At this time Lindholm’s detailed ethnography of the Yusufzai Pukhtuns in Swat also appeared. This amplifies and updates Barth’s account. Lindholm, like Barth, writes from the point of view of the powerful, and offers little insight into the lives of the poor and landless, yet dismisses Asad’s class critique as ‘oversimplistic’.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Importantly, Barth’s introduction to his edited volume (*Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969, cf. Banks *op.cit.*: 14ff.) bucked the then new ideology of division by focusing on the persistence of boundaries between named categories of people in spite of the osmosis of personnel across them. This approach admits an historical perspective on the material bases and structural constraints to individual and collective negotiation and strategies. For a relational approach to tribes and the state, see Richard Tapper (ed), *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan*. London: Croom Helm, 1983.

⁴⁷ Barth describes honour and shame as idioms used to manage economic conflict and political competition (*op.cit.*, 1959a, pp. 82ff.), as do C. Lindholm and C. Lindholm (‘Marriage as warfare’, *Natural History*, Oct. 1979, pp. 11-20), Nancy Tapper, *op.cit.*, 1991. These writers offer an approach which is very different from those essentializing accounts of Pashtunwali, and honour and shame (which often reify Ahmed’s ideal types, *nang* and *galang* (*op.cit.* p. 73ff.) that continue to appear regularly in the literature (e.g. David Kilcullen, ‘Taliban and Counter-Insurgency in Kunar’ in Guistozzi (ed), *op.cit.*, 2009a, pp. 231-245, 234ff. and Ann Jones, *Kabul in Winter: Life without Peace in Afghanistan*, New York: Picador, 2006, p. 40ff.). For a radical approach to discourses of honour and shame in the Middle East, see Nancy Lindisfarne (‘Variant Masculinities, Variant Virginites: Rethinking “Honour and Shame”’, in Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne, eds., *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 82-96).

⁴⁸ Akbar S. Ahmed, *op.cit.*; Michael Meeker, ‘The Twilight of a South Asian Heroic Age: A Rereading of Barth’s Study of Swat’, *Man* (NS), 15, 1980, pp. 682-701; Charles Lindholm, *Generosity and Jealousy: The Swat Pukhtun of Northern Pakistan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, p.92 and compare Lindholm, this volume.

Swat and the Taliban

With this ethnographic history in mind, let us consider what has since happened in Swat, first under Bhutto, and then, when Swat became the focus of global interest, with the rise of the Taliban and their suppression in May and June of 2009. My interest is to draw together issues of class, social movements, state politics and imperialism. It is a point of view which complements others, such as that of Nichols, in this volume.⁴⁹

When Swat was fully absorbed into Pakistan in 1969, it was a feudal state, much as Barth described it a decade before.⁵⁰ The population was divided between a small elite, mostly Yusufzai Pakhtuns, led by large landowning khans; some small-holders and the rest of the population, most of whom worked for the khans as sharecroppers.

In the same year, 1969, there was also a mass peasant upheaval all across NWFP.⁵¹ In Swat too, landless peasants occupied the land they cultivated and 'acquired up to 42% of land in some villages'.⁵² This uprising was part of the much larger movement when 'Maoist groups organized peasants to fight for the eradication of feudal taxes and a more just tenancy system'.⁵³ The peasants believed that Bhutto, the then President of Pakistan, meant them to get the land. In Swat, as elsewhere, 'the struggle turned violent, with significant loss of life

⁴⁹ And compare Anatol Lieven's *Pakistan: A Hard Country*, London: Penguin, 2011.

⁵⁰ Fredrik Barth, *The Last Wali of Swat: An Autobiography as told to Fredrik Barth*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

⁵¹ The North West Frontier Province was renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in April 2010.

⁵² Sartaj Khan, 'Imperialism, Religion and Class in Swat', *International Socialism*, 123, 2009, pp. 21-26, p. 23.

⁵³ Kamran Asdar Ali, 'Pakistan's Troubled "Paradise on Earth"', *Middle East Report Online*, 29 April 2009, 6 pp., p. 4. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero04909.html> (accessed 20 May 2010).

and property, and thousands were arrested'.⁵⁴ The land disputes of this period continue to be contested in the courts.

The uprising was quelled when the military took power, executed Bhutto and put a stop to the class-based mass movement. In Swat too the military coup had this effect, while, as Ali argues, the landowners succeeded in dividing the peasant struggle 'partly on the basis of identity politics, raising the issue of Pashtun solidarity'.⁵⁵

In the following decade, a middle class began to emerge in Swat. Increasingly, peasants became labour migrants, and sent home remittances from the textile mills of Karachi and from the Gulf. 'But the men left behind, disproportionately unskilled and ill-educated, [faced] grim economic prospects indeed'.⁵⁶ Although after 1978, some made good money from the war in Afghanistan and from trade and smuggling.⁵⁷ In the early 1990s, there was a real-estate boom, and the new middle class, including labour migrants and border entrepreneurs, sought to challenge the landowning elite. Meanwhile, the landlords, many now absentee, turned to cash-cropping tobacco, sugarcane and cotton, but the agricultural oppression remained, and 'the large landlords [were] also likely to hold concessions for the timber forests and the contracts to operate the gemstone mines that also employ the working class of Swat'.⁵⁸

In 1992, the landowning khans were being squeezed between the poor and the new middle class. These two quite different forces opened a space for the rise of the TNSM, the Tehrik Nifaz-i Shariat Muhammad. This movement 'presented sharia law as an answer to the

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵⁷ And see Asad's excellent ethnography on poppy production in NWFP. During fieldwork, he relied on his own kin as body guards and played the dynamics of local feuds to protect him (Amirzada Asad and Robert Harris, *The Politics and Economics of Drug Production on the Pakistan Afghanistan Border: Implications for a Globalized World*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

⁵⁸ Ali, *op.cit.*

public grievances, most significantly the rapid settlement of land disputes'.⁵⁹ After 9/11, the TNSM also mobilized support to fight the Americans in Afghanistan, and their leaders were swiftly jailed. Meanwhile, Swati peasants and most other Pakistanis became increasingly hostile to the American war in Afghanistan, American bombing and American political interventions in Pakistan. Support for the Taliban increased across NWFP. In 2002, a coalition of moderate Islamists won the elections and continued to allow the Taliban safe haven. The Islamists stayed in power in NWFP until the elections in 2008.

Throughout this period, '[c]lass interests could be disseminated in the name of Islam and sharia. That is how Mullah Fazlullah, the leader of the Swat Taliban, appeared on the scene'.⁶⁰ Initially, the man also known as the Radio Mullah because of his FM broadcasts, 'enjoyed support from all sections of society ... in the name of '[q]uick justice and efficient government'.⁶¹ As the Radio Mullah gained influence, the movement grew more radical, and became a party of the rural poor: taxing the khans, then targeting them and the police and administration which supported them. The Swati elite responded by demanding that Musharraf quell the Taliban militarily.

By September 2006, the Pakistani government was forced to do a comprehensive deal with the Taliban across NWFP and effectively surrender control in Waziristan.⁶² From 2007, there was increasing violence between the Taliban militia and the Pakistani army and paramilitary, but by autumn 2008, the Taliban had gained control of a number of villages in Swat.

In the elections of 2008, the voters in NWFP changed sides again, and supported the Awami National Party of Pakhhtun nationalists. The

⁵⁹ Khan, *op.cit.*, p. 24. See also Lieven, this volume.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

⁶² See Abou Zahab, this volume.

Awami National Party was led by Asfandyar Wali, a grandson of Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the founder of the Khodai Khidmatgar, the Servants of God, also known as the Red Shirts, the secular, anti-khan, pro-peasant, pro-land reform and sometime Pakhtun nationalist movement which had dominated politics in NWFP from 1925 until 1948.⁶³

In 2008, the Awami National Party - absent its earlier progressive stance - was allied to the national government of the Pakistan People's Party. In the eyes of the people, the PPP represented the left in Pakistan. However, voters seem to have switched sides not because they favoured the party, but because it was the least objectionable choice when none of the politics on offer addressed their concerns. They continued to fear the khans, and to feel solidarity with the Afghans suffering the American occupation, but they were repelled by the terrorist targeting of civilians in Pakistan and above all they did not want war in their own country.

In February 2009, the Taliban gained control of the major towns in Swat and forced the provincial government, led by the Awami National Party, to negotiate an 'accord'. This was an agreement to a ceasefire in return for the surrender of all state control of a vast area of Pakistan's northwest frontier with Afghanistan. It ceded 'judicial, administrative and security authority, including police functions, to the local Islamic groups'⁶⁴ under the leadership of Sufi Muhammad, Mullah Fazlullah's father-in-law and the previously jailed leader of the TNSM. The big landowners left Swat as the Taliban gained control⁶⁵ and their tenants no longer had to pay rents. In that moment there was a revolution in class relations in Swat.

⁶³ Cf. Vartan Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1948*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969, p. 323 ff.; S. Rittenberg, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Pukhtuns: The Independence Movement in India's NWFP*, Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic, 1988; Mukulika Banarjee, *The Pathan Unarmed*. Oxford: James Curre, 2000.

⁶⁴ Ali, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

⁶⁵ Cf. Lindholm, and Weiss, this volume.

It is clear that the 'impetus for the accord came from the state',⁶⁶ just as earlier in Waziristan. With the Swat 'accord' in place, the Taliban advanced to within sixty miles of Islamabad. The earlier deal with the Taliban in Waziristan, and the Swat 'accord', both deeply disturbed the American government. They wanted the Pakistani army deployed to secure NATO transport routes and regain control of the frontier territory which had become safe-haven for the Afghan Taliban. The concern of the Pakistani elite was different. Their fear was that the Taliban advance in Swat would set off risings in the Punjab⁶⁷ and elsewhere and they would seize power in Pakistan, an ambition Taliban spokesmen did not deny.⁶⁸ 'The Taliban have advanced deeper into Pakistan by engineering a class revolt that exploits profound fissures between wealthy landlords and their landless tenants in a strategy that may help militants make broader inroads in the populous heartland.'⁶⁹

By April 2009 the Americans were making it clear that they would attack the Taliban in Swat if the Pakistan government did not itself act. In early May, Afghanistan's President Karzai and Pakistan's President Zardari met Obama at the White House, just as the Pakistani military and paramilitary, with American support, mounted a massive operation. By June 1st, after heavy bombing and death squads on the ground, the army retook Mingora city in Swat. Many Taliban and others

⁶⁶ Ali, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

⁶⁷ See Martin, this volume. 'In south Punjab, the class factor is quite crucial in understanding the purist-militarist ideology as the local mullahs seem to be trying to assert themselves as mouthpieces for the have-nots against the feudal dynasts' (Iftikhar Malik, Personal Communication,).

⁶⁸ Declan Walsh, 'Pakistani troops continue assault on Taliban near Swat valley', *The Guardian*, 27 Ap. 2009, www.guardian.co.uk/.../Pakistan-troops... (accessed 20 May 2010). Cf. Akbar S. Ahmed and Gustaaf Houtman, 'Swat in the Eye of the storm', *Anthropology Today*, 25/5, 2009, pp. 20-22.

⁶⁹ Jane Perlez and Pir Zubair Shah, 'Taliban exploit class rift to gain ground in Pakistan', 16 Ap 2009, http://www.vuw.ac.nz/~caplabtb/dprk/US_world09.htm#april09 (accessed 20 May 2010); cf. 'The Taliban's latest tactic; Class warfare. In roads are being made in Pakistan by playing poor against the wealthy', *International Herald Tribune*, 17 Ap. 2009.

were killed, though the onslaught was less horrific than it might have been because more than half the civilian population of Swat became refugees, creating one of the greatest flights from military violence in history. Of a population of two million, perhaps 500,000 people fled the state in the first week of May.⁷⁰ They joined others who had left earlier, and yet others followed. Mercifully, many were able to find refuge with relatives elsewhere in Pakistan and avoided fetching up in the camps.

By August, as hundreds of thousands of refugees were returning to their devastated homes, there were nonetheless fears that the Swat valley would be destabilized because wealthy landowners were 'refusing to return, handing the insurgents a significant victory'.⁷¹ The legacy has a class character: some fear and hate the Taliban, others loathe the Pakistani military, and the Americans, for their reprisals.

Near Mingora, a year after the Taliban took control of the city, some 200,000 were still being fed daily by the World Food Program,⁷² and a million people were still displaced when the devastating floods hit in August 2010.⁷³ Meanwhile the Taliban and the people who support them are still there. The Taliban were quick to offer flood relief to the people in Swat and elsewhere,⁷⁴ and they are likely to reappear as a political force if the army leaves.

⁷⁰ Declan Walsh, 'Humanitarian Crisis in Swat', *The Guardian*, 7 May 2009, [Theage.com.au/world/humanitarian_crisis_in_swat_valley_20090506_avaf.html](http://www.theage.com.au/world/humanitarian_crisis_in_swat_valley_20090506_avaf.html) (accessed 20 May 2010).

⁷¹ Jane Perlez and Pir Zubair Shah, 'Landowners still in exile from unstable Pakistan ahead', 28 July 2009, http://www.vuw.ac.nz/~caplabtb/dprk/US_world09.htm#august09 (accessed 20 May 2010); cf. 'Lack of landowners could destabilize Swat valley', *International Herald Tribune*, News, 7 Aug. 2009.

⁷² J. Malcolm Gracia, 'A Year Later, Life Resumes in the Swat Valley', 21 Jan. 2010. http://www.allvoices.com/contributed_news/5086650-a-year-later-life, etc.

⁷³ Riaz Khan, 'More than 1,100 dead as Pakistan floods wash away whole villages', *The Guardian*, 2 Aug. 2010, p. 12.

⁷⁴ *The New York Times*, Editorial, 'Rage and Floods in Pakistan', 4 Aug 2010, p. A18.

The Afghan Taliban

Let me now draw on insights from Swat to consider how attention to class, and the universalizing ideology of the Taliban, can help us to understand the present resistance to American occupation. Certainly what is happening in Afghanistan is similar, and intimately connected, to what has occurred in Swat. But as Azerbaijani Moghaddam points out, focusing on the south and east of Afghanistan and the Pashtun-ness of the Taliban misses much concerning the extreme 'poverty' (aka class relations) and resistance of non-Pashtuns throughout the country.⁷⁵

David Edwards account of the Afghan Taliban illustrates Azerbaijani Moghaddam's point. Though Edwards himself laments the practice, his 'Learning from the Swat Pathans: political leadership in Afghanistan, 1978-97' is a discussion of global politics framed through the lens of anthropology. Edwards' project is to understand why, given the conflict in Afghanistan, 'the Swat literature has been so widely ignored'.⁷⁶ He approaches this apparent conundrum by seeking to discover how much, or little, of Afghan politics up to 1997 conforms with the ethnographic contributions of Barth, Asad, Ahmed and Meeker. In this context, what he adds from his own interesting ethnography has a limited explanatory range.

Because none of his chosen anthropological experts were describing revolutionary politics or a civil war, the lives of impoverished, fearful peasants, dictatorships and resistance movements in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the Chechen Islamists fight against Soviet occupation or oil politics and imperialism, all these

⁷⁵ Sippi Azerbaijani Moghaddam, 'Northern Exposure for the Taliban', in Guistozi, (ed), *op.cit.*, 2009a, pp. 247-268. Cf. A. Klaitis and G. Gulmamadova-Klaitis, *Love and War in Afghanistan*, New York: Seven Stories, 2005.

⁷⁶ *American Ethnologist*, 25/4, 1998, pp. 712-728, p. 712, yet compare Edwards' own far-reaching history, *Heroes of the Age*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

topics are absent. Yet the Taliban, the foreign fighters in Afghanistan and many other ordinary Afghans knew a great deal, and had strong opinions, about these things

Edwards denies any great virtue to class-analyses (pace Asad), thought he sees some mileage in Ahmed's notion of 'charismatic leadership'. Indeed, Edwards ascribes Taliban success to three things: the link between their purist Islam and 'village identity', war exhaustion, and the invisibility of their leadership. Edwards' account is narrowly focused on ethnicity and sectarianism, so much so that he ends on a most curious note. He writes of the Taliban in 1997, 'While Pakhtuns made up something under 50 % of the prewar population and are traditionally the most powerful ethnic group in Afghanistan, they are also famously fractious, and no party or movement had previously managed to bring so much of this large and disparate population under one political umbrella'⁷⁷ - a statement which ignores the entire history of the Afghan state from Abdur Rahman Khan on.

Let me now draw out a few points from the important work on the neo-Taliban by Giustozzi whose strategic study is essentially pro-government, and not at all class orientated.⁷⁸ This makes my suggestive shortcut all the more potent.

But first, a few contextualizing remarks. In Afghanistan there was, as in Swat, a class of feudal landlords, some of whom remain powerful today. Gregorian, writing of the 1930s, describes a situation which remained little changed until the coup in 1974.

For the most part, the feudal tribal chieftains and big landholders owned the country's water rights and controlled the great bulk of the agricultural product. According to the estimates of Soviet Afghanists, some 70 per cent of the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 725.

⁷⁸ Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

cultivated land and a great percentage of the irrigation facilities and water rights belong to the big and moderately well-to-do landowners. The peasants, who represented an estimated 90 per cent or more of the population of Afghanistan, owned less than one-fifth of the cultivated land. About 30 per cent of them were landless, and most of the others cultivated at least part of their lands as tenants.⁷⁹

During the Soviet war, few landlords became leaders of the resistance. A few fighters were committed Taliban, but most leaders were members of the new educated, middle class. They were engineers and the like, people who shared a class position with the leading Afghan communists.⁸⁰ After the Soviets left, these leaders emerged as a new elite, of ‘new khans’, warlords and druglords.⁸¹ Meanwhile, ‘The Taliban’s seizure of power was among other things a class struggle, in which the urban bourgeoisie were for the moment losers’⁸² Then, after 2001, others around the Karzai government came to occupy this position.⁸³ Far removed from the Karzai elite in class terms are the Taliban, including Mullah Omar and other leading figures, who look like and talk like the small peasant farmers and sharecroppers who follow them.⁸⁴

In the first years of the American occupation, Afghans were quiescent and hopeful: for an economy which would allow them to support their families and a reconstruction which would bring safe roads, clinics and education back into their lives. Joining the

⁷⁹ *Op.cit.*, 319-20.

⁸⁰ Neale, *op.cit.*.

⁸¹ Guistozzi, *op.cit.*, 2009b, p. 35ff.

⁸² Dorransoro, *op.cit.*, p. 288.

⁸³ On how this shift affected the lives of ordinary people, see Said Hyder Akbar and Susan Barton, *Come Back to Afghanistan: My Journey from California to Kabul*, London: Bloomsbury, 2006; Deborah Rodriguez, *The Kabul Beauty School*, London: Hodder, 2008 and Schetter (this volume).

⁸⁴ Abdul Salam Zaef, *My Life with the Taliban*. London: Hurst, 2010.

resistance, or at least tacitly supporting it, came later. As a Pakistani official from South Waziristan put it: ‘Military actions and policy have contributed to the anarchical situation that pro-Taliban militants are more than happy to fill. Their demonstrated ability to restore order, prosecute criminals and dispense speedy justice was welcomed by many civilians fed up with violence and insecurity’.⁸⁵ Or, as another analyst said, ‘fear of the militants, combined with resentment against a corrupt administration and draconian laws, has contributed to local acquiescence of Taliban-style governance’.⁸⁶

The pattern is the same as that associated with the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s. It has been repeated in Uruzgan, the Helmand and among ‘disenfranchised communities’ elsewhere.⁸⁷ The resistance has grown as the local government has been increasingly undermined and the occupation has become more violent, with air strikes causing more civilian deaths and internal refugees.⁸⁸ The process is organic. A Mullah and Taliban commander in Kunar delivered a funeral eulogy for ‘an insurgent’ and an unnamed woman and her nursing infant: he told the people they needed to be angry at the Coalition Force and the Afghan National Security Forces for causing these tragic deaths and invited ‘everyone who wants to fight to join the fighters who traveled with him’.⁸⁹

Giustozzi describes the neo-Taliban movement in terms of a small hard-core and much larger numbers of local insurgents. He notes that from 2003, ‘the pattern according to which local communities divided up into pro-government and pro-Taliban did not follow a strict

⁸⁵ Guistozzi, *op.cit.*, 2008, p. 39

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 68.

⁸⁸ Cf. J. Rico, *Blood Makes the Grass Grow Green: A Year in the Desert with Team America*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2007, Tom Coghlan, ‘The Taliban in Helmand: An oral history’ in Guistozzi, (ed), *op.cit.*, pp. 119-153 and Christopher Reuter and Borhan Younus, ‘The Return of the Taliban in Ander District, Ghazni’, in Guistozzi (ed), *op.cit.*, pp. 101-118.

⁸⁹ *International Herald Tribune*, ‘The Afghan War Logs’, World News, 26 July 2010, 1, 6-7, p. 6.

tribal logic. The Taliban were ready to accept anybody who shared their views and accepted their rules, regardless of ethnicity and tribe',⁹⁰ as Uzbeks and other non-Pashtuns have done.

With respect to Taliban recruitment, of equal significance is the fact that Afghan government figures put unemployment at 33% of the workforce or higher.⁹¹ Some 56 % of the people employed work in the agricultural sector, and of the total population some 28% are literate.⁹² In one of the very poorest countries in the world, that means the majority of people - the locals - are likely to be quite hostile to those with wealth and power, whether criminal, inherited or acquired through corruption and/or government patronage. Corruption is a class issue. And as the former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan has described, the occupation is failing, not least because 'poverty and unemployment are at their peak and the roots of the economy are drying up' and America has 'exploited the poverty of Afghans to the utmost'.⁹³

Guistozi's description of the origins and growth of the Afghan Taliban is detailed and convincing. His focus on Pashtuns in the south and east has been broadened in his edited volume which includes descriptions of local responses to the vicissitudes of the war and important insights into the lives of ordinary Afghans.⁹⁴ Yet, Guistozi's study of the warlords, Dostam in the north and Ismail Khan in the west, in spite of its formidable detail, is limited by a theoretical formalism. We learn almost nothing about who controls the land, or how the majority of Afghans gain their livelihoods.⁹⁵ And though warlords may be susceptible to 'ideological contamination' to gain legitimacy and

⁹⁰ Guistozi, *op.cit.*, p. 47.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁹³ Zaeef, *op.cit.*, 238, 240.

⁹⁴ Guistozi (ed), *op.cit.*, 2009a.

⁹⁵ Giostozzi, *op.cit.*, 2009b, p.138 ff.

followers,⁹⁶ he does not explore ordinary Afghans' beliefs, class sentiments and opposition to warlordism.

Until now, what has been most obviously missing from scholarly discussion and political analyses are ethnographic accounts of the universalizing rhetoric and practice of resistance and the class politics on which it draws. A class discourse has been an important part of the politics of NWFP since the Redshirts of the 1930s. In Afghanistan, though explicit class politics was utterly discredited by the violence of the Communist regime, class relations have not ceased. Smallholders, sharecroppers and agricultural workers remain the majority in the countryside. The urban poor work for wages as cleaners, hairdressers, watchmen and drivers, while other workers are in the pay of warlords, the occupation and the Afghan government.⁹⁷ Even Karzai must have garnered some popular support with his threat to 'join the Taliban' in an effort to protect Kandahar from an American surge in the summer of 2010.⁹⁸

The echoes reverberate. At the end of the second volume of his history, Kaye writes of imperial over-reach and the disgrace of the British retreat from Kabul in 1842: 'For the Lord God of recompenses shall surely requite'.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁹⁷ Neamatollah Nojumi, Dyan Nazurana and Elizabeth Stites, *Life and Security in Afghanistan*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009.

⁹⁸ Jon Boone and Ewan MacAskill, 'Obama moves to bypass Karzai as drug abuses claim adds to dismay over his behaviour', *The Guardian*, 8th Ap. 2010, p. 27.

⁹⁹ John William Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*. 3 vols. London: Wm. H. Allen, 1878, p. 390. Cf. Simon Jenkins, 'A History of Folly, from the Trojan Horse to Afghanistan', *The Guardian*, 28 July 2010, p.31 and Geoff Cowling, John Newsinger, 'Failing to Learn the Lessons of Afghan History', *The Guardian*, 29 July 2010, p. 29.

Locating Resistance

The expanding 'enlightened' European, and later American, empires often met with armed resistance framed in religious terms: from the benighted fuzzy-wuzzys of the Sudan, to the mad mullahs of NWFP and the ghost dancers at Wounded Knee. After the middle of the 20th century, western imperial hegemony became more vulnerable. People who were in favour of the national independence movements in Africa and Asia saw themselves as supporting leftist political resistance against imperial capitalism. Yet now when the hypocrisy of western secular democracies is widely understood, the political left is confused about the religious banner under which Hizbollah, Hamas and Taliban resistances fight.

The twist which demonizes religious resistance movements also creates political paralysis. Many people deplore the American occupation of Afghanistan, but can find little sympathy for a resistance movement led by the right-wing Taliban. This contradictory middle position, which is both anti-American and anti-Taliban, is immensely unsettling to inhabit.

Some who adopt it are pro-Muslim but conservative in class terms.¹⁰⁰ Others are secularists. On the extreme right are secular fundamentalists like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the former Dutch MP, and Gita Sahgal, recently of Amnesty International.¹⁰¹ Other secularists are left-leaning. Some, like RAWA (Revolutionary Association Women of Afghanistan) feminists are on the far left. Other progressive secularists may support the ideal of national liberation, but have little interest in

¹⁰⁰ Akbar S. Ahmed, 25/4/2009 <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/Akbarahmed-lose-lawless-tribal....>; Akbar S. Ahmed and Gustaaf Houtman, *op.cit.*

¹⁰¹ Emma Brockes, 'Why are Muslims so Hypersensitive?', *The Guardian Weekend*, 8th May, 2010, pp. 21-26; Mark Townsend, 'Gita Sahgal's dispute with Amnesty International puts human rights group in the dock', *The Observer*, 25th April 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/apr/25/gita-sahgalamnesty-international>.

the lives, and choices, of the people actually involved. Often they are uninformed, or dismissive, of the class dynamics of the Taliban resistance and focus on the Taliban religious bigots. In this process, many middle and working class people end up, by default, supporting the occupation and the interests of the imperial and national elite.

Instead of seeing the occupation as the problem, not the solution, those holding this middle position retreat to the right. First, some assume that ordinary Afghan working people are unable to govern themselves, a latter-day version of 'white man's burden'. Second, others are convinced that the Muslim (but not Christian) religious right is invariably autocratic, in spite of the democratic elections of Hamas in Palestine and the present government in Turkey. Third, most do not think in military terms and are unable to see the Taliban resistance as a new form of guerrilla warfare in circumstances of immense military inequality. For instance, Taliban attacks on schools, roads and government offices are of tactical and strategic importance in weakening the Karzai government and as a response to the American's increasing use of drones and targeted killing.¹⁰² It is notable that when the Taliban have gained control of an area, as in the case of Musa Kala, they then have shown themselves willing to relax their ideological strictures.¹⁰³ Finally, for some, the bias is categorical and an aspect of class war: middle class women are particularly vociferous opponents of the Taliban, yet they resist comparing abuses of women's rights with the numbers of women, (and men and children) killed, maimed, and made homeless by the war and occupation itself.¹⁰⁴

A guerrilla war can only be sustained with local support. The Taliban are locals, while the majority of Afghans of whatever gender

¹⁰² Helene Cooper and Mark Landler, 'U.S. Shifts to Targeted Killings in Afghanistan', *International Herald Tribune*, 2 Aug 2010, pp. 1,8.

¹⁰³ Guistozi, *op.cit.*, 2008, p. 72.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.176.

or ethnic background want an end to the American occupation. I share their wish. At present the Taliban are the only force with the express aim of achieving that result. The Taliban and the Americans have been in contact and looking for a settlement for some time.¹⁰⁵ What the future bodes is hardly clear: perhaps a return to the status quo ante, in a country now further brutalized and impoverished by the past decade of war.

Treating what is happening in Afghanistan in terms of class analyses and theories of empire invites academics and others to consider their own class and political loyalties. A wider focus also makes it easier to point out that when people ally themselves with an invader, they soon find themselves hated by those who oppose the occupation. This is what has weakened secularists and feminists in Afghanistan since the Soviet 1980s. And although the argument is a powerful one: that being (or supporting) the invaders has exacerbated the 'security threat' and generated great hostility and anger around the world against the US and UK governments, in reality it ignores stronger arguments about global capitalism and resistance to imperial power. The echoes reverberate. At the end of the second volume of his history, Kaye writes of imperial over-reach and the disgrace of the British retreat from Kabul in 1842: 'For the Lord God of recompenses shall surely requite'.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Julian Borger, 'Assault deepens Afghan anxieties over what will happen when Nato troops leave' *The Guardian*, 14 September 2011, p.14.

¹⁰⁶ John William Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*. 3 vols. London: Wm. H. Allen, 1878, p. 390. Cf. Simon Jenkins, 'A History of Folly, from the Trojan Horse to Afghanistan', *The Guardian*, 28 July 2010, p.31 and Geoff Cowling and John Newsinger, 'Failing to Learn the Lessons of Afghan History', *The Guardian*, 29 July 2010, p. 29.