Epilogue
The Moral Burden of the Insurgent

From the liberated zones of the Adivasis in central India to the oil pirates of the Niger Delta to the successionist fighters of lower Burma and to the Frankenstein rebels of Iraq and Palestine, this book examined the complex relationship between the grievances of dispossessed communities and their heightened antagonisms with the powered elites, which led to the sort of insurgent cultures that characterize, and are made legible by, the new wave of literary texts, films, and life writings from the Global South. These emerging modes of literary and narrative traditions, as this book has shown, are primed to offer a nuanced account of the struggles, causes, conditions, affects, motifs, solidarities, and communal bonds that drive marginalized communities toward armed violence, as opposed to their pathological treatment in state archives, media reports, legal documents, police records, and court trails as the agents of revolutionary ideologies, antistate and antisovereign plots of sedition, separatism, armed opportunism, and, more often than not, terrorism.

Poised against the vertical hierarchies of the state and its bureaucratic apparatus of classifying, naming, and labeling forms of subaltern violence as impulsive, mythical, lumpen, ideologically docile, or illegitimate, the literary texts discussed in this book situate themselves on a horizontal axis of communal, tribal, intimate, ethno-nationalist, and noncombatant solidarities for myriad forms of insurgent counterviolence that are essentially "state-dystonic."[1] Such a view enables a theoretical realignment of insurgency as the mobilization of violence for grand, mythic, and ideological causes – as seen through the eyes of the state – as well as violence for small causes, namely, the splintered violence conjured under a fount of conceptual rubrics: divine violence, intimate violence, routine violence, everyday violence, inherited violence, subterranean violence, and peripheral violence, to say nothing of the absent presences of violence, (dis)enchanted solidarities, and the intrasecular sublime. The very form of the texts featured in this book, in their splintered, disruptive, and peripheral modes

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of (ir)realism – from the picaresque characters of *Oil on Water* to the vagrant rebels of *Miss Burma* to the irrealist, ghostly insurgent narrators of *The Corpse Washer* or *The Attack* – bear testimony to a burgeoning literary archive, one moving away from the first wave of insurgency texts and, more importantly, their penchant for the violence of grand causes: the imminent ideologies of nationalism, anticolonialism, or proletarian revolution.

While these various conceptual moves and maneuvers may well mount a counter-critique of established frames of violence, they do not necessarily capture the temporalities that inhabit the ethical, affective, struggle-driven, and moral contingencies of peripheral worlds forged through insurgent bonds, which brings us to the ever-pertinent, ever-evasive question: What happens to the insurgents between killing and dying or, for that matter, before they even arrive at the decision to kill? Let us venture into a thought experiment for an answer, and collect evidence from the trail of destruction left behind insurgent violence from India to Iraq. If we were to comb through the pages of this book looking for the dismembered body parts of the insurgents, we would find the following: one lone arm floating away in the Delta creeks, a severed head of a Shiite engineer from Baghdad, a half-eaten torso of an Iraqi soldier on the roadside of Basra, eighteen body pieces of a revolutionary singer from South India, a desecrated corpse of a Karen rebel leader at the bottom of an ocean, the head of a Palestinian suicide bomber, a pile of spare limbs in the corpse washer's saloon, the prosthetic leg of a Karenni boy, several chopped-off body parts of a Bihari landlord, and the burned face of Boma.

And imagine reconstructing our Whatsitsname from an assortment of these parts: a multicultural monster, a resurrected postcolonial corpse, charging toward his enemy with a derisive middle finger sticking up, and with explosives bolted to its waist. Where would it be heading first? Who would be its first victim? What stories would each of the fallen body parts tell, having fulfilled their mission?

Let us begin with the face. Though Boma herself does not kill or die, her entire domestic sphere, including almost all of her family members, is entangled in the business of killing and dying. Her husband, John, is party to the abduction of a British woman. Her brother, the journalist, steps into a dead man's shoes to make a name for himself. Her father lands in prison for conducting deals with oil bandits. The burned face, caused by an explosion at her father's gig, itself becomes a symptom of the lack and every subsequent loss in Boma's life: John's father dies while trying to save her from the explosion, and John himself leaves Boma as he can't bear

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looking at her scarred face – a chronic reminder of their collective destitution. Left with an imprisoned father, a rogue journalist brother, and an estranged husband, Boma turns to the worshippers on Irikefe Island, who promise her an alternative under the shelter of armed guerrillas and oil bandits.

As for the cracked skull of the Naxalite, Mahendra Chamar, his sister-in-law gets sodomized for refusing the advances of upper-caste men; in other cases, the entire untouchable *tola* get burned and razed, the sisters of untouchable men get raped for asking a hard day's wage labor, and the men are forced to have sex with their kin before they are lynched. The killers go scot-free. But justice arrives in the form of a compensation check from none other than the minister of the state. Disaffective, dispassionate, liberal justice meets its own uncanny double – the fury of affective injustice. Mahendra Chamar throws a stone at the gates of the upper-caste *haveli*, draws all the men out, and executes them in full public view as though he was acting on a divine order of justice.

That the Burman boy, forcefully recruited by the junta to fight the insurgents, should have a prosthetic leg at the expense of a Karenni insurgent amputee is no consolation for a nation that needs both legs to stand upright. The insurgent is doubly amputated; he loses his organic leg to the land mine planted by the Burmese junta, and his inorganic leg to the Burman solider who steps on his own land mine. Lynton, the other Burmese insurgent fleshed into Whatsitsname, risks everything – even the solidarity of his rivals fighting for the same Karen cause – to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict, only to be betrayed and killed in an ambush. And when all avenues of conciliation are sealed off, the leader's wife shoulders the burden of insurgency. From husband to wife, the daughter of the Karen parents inherits insurgency as though it were a property title.

But what of the suicide bomber Sihem? Her story is not grueling like that of Boma, Louisa, or Chamar, and yet she kills innocent bystanders, including children, in the streets of Tel Aviv. After all, she was cocooned, like Amu and Udayan in their plush Tollygunge bungalows, in the sheltered life subsidized by her surgeon husband. That insurgencies may arise out of seemingly non-oppressive conditions, just as in Sihem's case, goes to show that direct oppression, poverty, precarity, and affronts to human decency are not always a precondition for rebellion. It is often the unease with one's unjustified biopolitical privilege – as we have seen in the case of middle-class Naxalites – combined with the shame of survival that trigger a guilt-ridden and enchanted solidarity for the oppressed. Similarly, the secret of Sihem's insurgency does not lie with any immediate

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oppression she may have faced, but with the sense of affective injustice ignited by her privileged existence among the upper echelons of the Israeli community that she perceives to be the enemy of her *other* home. The usual tendency here is to read Sihem's suicide as a terrorist attack, but the fact that her attack had neither the logistical nor the organizational support of Palestinian militant groups points toward the affective solidarity of her actions rather than a politics driven by irremissible hate or contempt. Perhaps the gist of Sihem's affective constitution lies in the only words she utters in the novel, in the form of a terse letter:

> What use is happiness when it's not shared, Amin, my love? My joys faded away every time yours didn't follow. You wanted children. I wanted to deserve them. No child is completely safe if it has no country. Don't hate me. Sihem[2]

Sihem's faded joys were always there to be followed; they were Amin's, too, and it is just that he could not see them. The signs were already there, right in his face: the Israeli patients in the hospital didn't want an Arab doctor to touch them; his affluent neighbors made it abundantly clear to him that an Arab did not belong there, even if he was a surgeon, and even if he saved Israeli lives. Stephen Morton is therefore correct in suggesting that Amin's biggest failure is his inability to grasp how his biopolitical privileges were subsidized by the necropolitics next door.[3] From an Israeli perspective, after all, what use is it that an Arab Israeli saves a few Israeli lives, when Arab militants destroy more? From a Palestinian viewpoint, how outrageous is it that an Arab Israeli doctor saves Jewish lives, when the Jewish military is bulldozing their homeland? Sihem embraces this disequilibrium of death and dying thrust upon her *two* homelands – Palestine and Israel – in full force, and takes it upon herself to execute the doctrine of fair killing and fair dying, just violence and just society, so that the children on *either* side of the nation can have a safe country. In other words, Sihem's suicide demonstrates that it is not necessarily the children of Palestine who have no nation and, therefore, cannot be safe, but her own children (that she refused to have) in Israel who would not have been safe, even if they seem to have a nation, under such a ravaged state. Had it not been for her, another suicide bomber would have taken her place. The gist of Sihem's sacrifice lies in her shouldering of this insurgent void: no child would be safe in a world of even, unequal, and unjust distribution of violence.

In the spirit of Sihem's plea for just violence, the terse line suspended at the bottom of her letter – "Don't hate me" – can be read as an invitation to explosive healing, in which the mere *presence and persistence* of antistate

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violence serves as a moral buffer against the juggernaut of state violence, even if it involves throwing human bombs against a military tanker, or embarking on a suicide mission into the *haveli* of upper-caste men. This imperative for the legitimacy of nonstate violence – the "need to remain,"[4] as the Naxalite leader Kishan Ji in *Red Alert* puts it – brings us to the question of the moral burden vested in the insurgent figures in conjunction with other porous categories such as peasant insurgents (James Scott), primitive rebels, social bandits (Eric Hobsbawm), revolutionaries (Eric Wolf), and guerrillas (Jeff Conant).

But to revisit our seminal question that got us here: What stories do the body parts of Whatsitsname tell us before they fall off? The answer couldn't be any more porous than the insurgent categories listed above: from the Karenni leg to Chamar's skull to Lynton's torso and to Sihem's head, the received violence embodied in each of these organs *sheds off* Whatsitsname's body, having fulfilled its cathartic purpose. It is through this moral economy of reciprocating violence that the insurgent cultures I have described in this book take shape through myriad figures that resist neat configuration, but beat the same liberatory drum.

Although James Scott coined the term "moral economy" in the context of a subsistence ethic that peasants develop to avoid hunger and hardship, it is also applicable to insurgent cultures using violence that adhere to a similar logic: to avoid outright deprivation, threats to subsistence and the sources of survival – be they the tendu leaves, forest produce, crude oil, agrarian lands, and, most importantly, a right to participation in civic life and the national economy. As Scott himself concedes, peasants typically avoid confrontation with the landlords by tolerating a certain level of dominance and forging horizontal alliances with other peasants to cultivate this subsistence ethic.[5] But when this safety valve was blown by colonial interventions such as new land tenure systems and taxation policies, the peasants took to arms. Curiously, for Scott, it is the middle-strata peasants, not the poorest of them, who are in the best position to forge horizontal bonds due to their resourcefulness, and therefore offer

> the strongest resistance … [T]heir tenacity and the social organization from which they arise may provide the social dynamite for radical change. The situation of migrant workers and landless day laborers, in this context, may well seem more appropriate to strictly socialist ideas, but their social organization makes them less culturally cohesive and hence less resistant to hegemony.[6]

Eric Wolf, in his landmark study *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1969), arrives at a similar conclusion on the basis that the middle-class

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peasants are less dependent on the land-owning classes or governmental authorities, and are in fact better networked to stage an insurrection than those at the bottom rung.[7] While this view has been challenged by counterexamples from India, especially by the field of subaltern studies,[8] which shows that poor peasants are not ideologically docile and can stage an insurrection on their own, they do not necessarily exhaust the general thrust of Scott's and Wolf's argument that insurgent cultures are endemic to the middle classes; they have much to lose if they were to let their subsistence ethic or the tactical class advantage be destroyed by colonial hegemonies. As Scott reminds us, "[t]ypically, the peasant cultivator seeks to avoid the failure that will ruin him rather than attempting a big, but risky, killing. In decision-making parlance his behavior is risk averse; he minimizes the subjective probability of the maximum loss."[9] This moral economy of subsistence finds a renewed significance as the moral burden of the postcolonial insurgent who seeks to limit the damage caused by his own violence by extracting a maximum outcome. As Albert Camus argues, such moral burden is shouldered not only by the peasant rebels of India but also by the political rebels of Algiers: "Authentic acts of rebellion will only consent to take up arms for institutions that limit violence, not for those which codify it."[10]

Ranajit Guha, too, endorses this moral impulse of peasant violence under colonialism as astutely selective and, at times, constituted by symbolic and verbal assaults that could barely be considered as violence, much less a negation of authority to be met with punishment.[11] Challenging the colonial accounts, Guha reports that almost in all cases of colonial rebellions "the individuals and small groups . . . were driven by hunger and humiliation to commit acts of violence in such a way as to amount to turning things upside down."[12]

Equally, for Camus, the authentic rebel is invariably caught up in the dilemma of turning things upside down by extending universal solidarity against injustice, and the need for killing another human in the name of justice: his morality lies with a consideration for the exhaustion of "the alternatives to violence in order to give the demand for justice and the feeling of solidarity equal consideration."[13] Because the rebel can never justify the morality of killing, he must bear the burden of killing by sacrificing himself: "the only way of living collective passions is to be willing to die for them and by their hand."[14]

For this reason alone, the sacrifices of the middle-class characters to the insurgent causes and cultures cannot be nullified. Supratik's attempts to minimize the violence to his servant to maximize the benefits of the

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revolution, or Subhash's act of killing one policeman to terrorize many, or even Tango's mission to kill the head of the junta to save a nation from misery, make them no lesser moral rebels than Camus's protagonists who are willing to die for the same cause for which they were prepared to kill. In fact, from the Maoist insurgency in India to the Niger Delta rebellions, the contributions of the middle-class scribes as well as their rebel characters – from Ken Saro-Wiwa to Charu Majumdar to Sihem to Zaq – have been the lifeblood of the many sustaining insurgent traditions and cultures today. The attack on the Delhi Assembly Chamber on April 8, 1929, by Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt, who threw a bomb in an empty area of the public gallery to deliberately minimize fatalities, may be read in the very spirit of the moral burden thrust upon Scott's peasants and Camus's rebels.

The rebels' morality, however, is not of their own making. They derive it from their predecessors: guerrillas, syndicates, and social bandits. In his pioneering study *Bandits* (1967), Eric Hobsbawm remarks that the so-called pre-political figures who respond to forms of indignation and injustice without a preconceived ideology – just as in Hannah Arendt's reading of the spontaneous "political upheavals" staged "by the multitude of the poor and the downtrodden"[15] without a well-formulated revolutionary ideology – belong to "a world in which the moralists are also gunfighters, both because guns kill enemies and because they are the means of expression of men who cannot write the pamphlets or make the great speeches of which they dream."[16]

In the absence of words, it is the guns, bandoliers, and blunt arms that become the syntax of resistance or "the actual practice" in which "the bandit is considered an agent of justice, indeed a restorer of morality, and often considers himself as such."[17] It is therefore for a good reason that bandits enjoy popularity among people who provide them with shelter and shield them from the authorities, receiving gifts in return. This social economy of patron and client relationships, just as James Scott has observed in the context of East Asian peasants, imposes a moral burden upon the bandits to abide by social codes and respond to matters of communal injustice. As Hobsbawm writes, the "Catalan brigands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" were known for their judicious application of violence, using it only in matters of personal or communal vengeance, in "defence of their honour," often channeling harmless attacks on colonial military services or outposts: "This abstention from wanton violence is all the more astonishing, since the sort of environment in which bandits operate is often one in which all men go armed, where killing is normal, and where in any case the safest maxim is to shoot first and ask questions later."[18]

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Despite their preoccupation with violence, the social geneses of the many bandit figures and the "pre-political" moral burden shouldered by their aversion to use violence wantonly can be seen in insurgent characters from Bihar to the Delta creeks. Whereas Mahendra Chamar holds the firm view that once a community becomes politically aware of its conditions of oppression, its members can become insurgent without the use of arms, Tony Bryggs reasons that violence is the necessary last resort especially when it is the only language the enemy understands. The Ijaw monarch agrees: "We have begged, we have cried, we have threatened. My son, remember that he who has been rejected cannot reject himself."[19]

This audacious act of refusing social rejection through judicious use of violence is an essential characteristic of yet another kindred figure of the insurgent: the armed guerrilla. Made popular by Che Guevara's guerrilla mobilization in the Bolivian jungle (1950s), the Zapatista uprising in Mexico (1990s), and a host of "fringe" left groups in Peru and Colombia, the Latin American guerrilla figure, as Jeff Conant puts it,

> has also brought to the world's attention a particularly Mexican brand of surrealism, where we are forced to wonder which is the real reality – the subterranean reality of talking beetles and Indian women running through the jungle with ski masks and submachine guns, or the above-board reality of the stock market and the global banking system, where virtual trading in non-commodities trades wealth for hunger as quickly as the sun sets over the bulls and bears of Wall Street and rises over the tigers of Asia.[20]

Armed with submachine guns and ski masks, Zapatista guerrillas did not rob banks or bullion markets, but traded in jungle commodities by summarily rejecting the world of virtual non-commodities. Guns and ski masks here have no more than a performative function of symbolically defending a society against external aggressions: "return[ing] society to that original state. Not to turn back time, but to shepherd the cycle of history on its return to a more just society."[21] In spite of the grotesque makeup, Saadawi's Whatsitsname cannot resist his pull toward the seductive rogue of the guerrilla imagination – of returning Iraq to its *just* origins:

> The young madman thinks I'm the model citizen that the Iraqi state has failed to produce, at least since the days of King Faisal I. Because I'm made up of body parts of people from diverse backgrounds – ethnicities, tribes, races, and social classes – I represent the impossible mix that never was achieved in the past. I'm the first true Iraqi citizen, he thinks.[22]

While King Faisal no doubt lived up to his secular reputation till his ill-timed death, though far from being the benefactor of a just society that a

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Whatsitsname might envisage, it is the guerrillas' arm's-length relationship to power politics that sets them apart from our next category: the revolutionary. For Jeff Conant, revolutionary figures can be best described by their relationship to power: while figures such as Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa, and Che Guevara retain their status as global icons of guerrilla warfare, the likes of Lenin, Mao, and Tito have lost their relevance due to their ascendency to power.[23]

The task of a true revolutionary, then, like that of the authentic rebel who justifies the killing by embracing his own death, is to remain foreign to power and to any other mythic or sovereign ambitions. In the words of the Russian writer Sergei Nechayev, "A revolutionary is a man set apart. He has no personal interest, no emotions, no attachments, he has no property, not even a name.... All the times and everywhere he must do what the interest of the revolution demands, irrespective of his own personal inclination."[24] Almost a century later, in 1962, Eric Hobsbawm prudently distances himself from Nechayev's selflessly romantic revolutionary by proclaiming:

> All revolutionaries regard themselves, with some justification, as small elites of the emancipated and progressive operating among, and for the eventual benefit of, a vast and inert mass of the ignorant and misled common people, which would no doubt welcome liberation when it came, but could not be expected to take much part preparing for it. All of them tended to adopt the same type of revolutionary organization, or even the same organization: the secret insurrectionary brotherhood.[25]

In the context of Russian peasant revolts, Eric Wolf refers to the "unequal struggles of history"[26] to explain the outsourcing of insurgent ideology to "professional revolutionaries" recruited from educated urban youths, embodied in insurgent figures that can be found throughout this book. These middle-class characters are delicately positioned to counteract the polarity of subaltern ideologues such as the Professor, the Kurdish youths led by Marywan, or the fringe insurgents such as the Sibeye Boys – all of whom interpellate their own splinter ideologies on the basis of caste, class, color, and sectarian and factionalist identities into vanguard movements such as CPI (M), FFIN, the PKK, and MEND.

Inversely, the figure of the rogue enters the fray of our insurgent categories with a dual function: as a double for the subaltern insurgent and as a foil for the middle-class revolutionary, asserting a "Faustian presence" in the bourgeois bildungsroman, functioning "as both a sort of relief to the hero and a means of bodying forth the abject living conditions of the erstwhile hands of empire" in the postcolonial context.[27] In *Red*

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Alert, for instance, the peasant Naxalite goes rogue to contain the violence of Naxalites spiraling out of control. In *Chakravyuh*, the police informant Kabir goes rogue for the opposite reason: to put an end to the bulldozing of the Adivasis by the mining companies. Then, there are the urban gangs of Lagos Island in *A Swamp Full of Dollars*, the beauty queens and rumored mistresses of Burmese dictators, and the rogue elements in *Oil on Water* – all of whom form the underbelly of insurgent cultures with the minimum use of violence, often challenging the excessive use of violence by vanguard organizations. As an insurgent in *From the Land of Green Ghosts* puts it: "We have been fighting this loathsome regime, and its predecessor ever since independence.. . . Our nationalism had something blind about it – even if Burman arrogance was still more blind. But something important has happened. The Burmese people have at last begun to understand why we are fighting the regime."[28]

Because the insurgent consciousness cannot fully be abandoned in the face of a "blind" enemy, as the rival Karen leader in *Miss Burma* asserts, it can be achieved without the use of prolonged violence that the vanguard revolutionary organizations habitually weaponize: "'We are a peaceful, conciliatory people,' he said, taking the canteen back. 'It's true we've been betrayed, that we had reason to rise up. But does that mean we should give in to endless war?'"[29]

Such insurgent figures from the Global South, from peasant warriors to rebels, primitive bandits, revolutionaries, and rogues, mount a daunting critique of terrorism that has emerged as a normative template for understanding the violence used by the nonstate actors. The wheel has turned another full circle: as an ideological arm of the state during the French Revolution, the concept of terrorism has been cut loose from its original source, and handed over to a porous, amorphous body of nonstate combatants as a blunt weapon. The insurgent cultures showcased in this book are the result of desperate attempts made by myriad nonstate combatants to return this blunt weapon to its rightful owner: the state. They do so by mobilizing every blunt means and method at their disposal, and every unexhausted alliance at the nadir of their moral constitution: opium farmers and ruby pilferers collide with Buddhist monks; a wealthy Jewish businessman subsidizes a secessionist movement; diasporic returnees bite the revolutionary dust; middle-class men become martyrs; oil robbers set up a proxy state; Twitter activists, radio revolutionaries, and digital guerrillas undertake a resistance of repair. In view of such processional power, the concept of terrorism cannot derive its authority from its

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own semiotic merit; rather, it attains meaning by emptying out the moral burden vested in the figure of the insurgent.

I have two stories in mind, involving bandits, national heroes, rogues, and a Nobel Prize winner-turned-terrorist, stemming from colonial Eritrea and the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia, that best illustrate my critique of this frail syntax through insurgent tropes.[30] The first one begins with a family feud between Weldegabriel Mesazgi, an Eritrean citizen, and the local Italian governor, who is believed to have caused the death of Mesazgi's father by wrongful imprisonment. After acquiring some combat experience as an *askari* (native soldier) in the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935–1936, Weldegabriel returns home to quietly settle down on a farmland, but soon finds himself drawn into the old blood feud – this time with the son of the Italian governor who installs a non-local as the village chief.[31] In an overt political act, the Mesazgi brothers kill the governor's son and make a run for the nearby forest, earning much respect and support of the locals for their valiance. Cut off from civil life, the brothers enter the world of banditry, and to keep the Eritreans on their side, they mainly rob the Italians to make a living. The reign of terror unleashed by the brothers makes the streets so unsafe for travel that it leads to a new ordinance in the country where the Eritreans, who were not allowed to do so previously, could drive automobiles. The Ethiopians who wanted to bring Eritrea into the unionist fold give the bandits more than a warm treatment; they supply them with arms and shelter in Eritrea. Weldegabriel, in return, terrorizes the Eritrean Muslims into a merger with Ethiopia. Eventually, the bandit receives amnesty from the United Nations and finds himself in exile in the Tigré province. Recounting Weldegabriel's tale in his preface to *Bandits*, Eric Hobsbawm writes: "Eritrean patriots are in two minds about the career of Weldegabriel: a people's bandit, but one who was instrumental in making their country into a part of Ethiopia."[32]

The second story begins where the first one ends – the Tigré region – the hotbed of present-day conflict under the watch of Abiy Ahmed, the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize winner. After thirty years of iron-fisted rule, the Tigré ethnic elite caved to the insurgent resistance brewing within the country from the other ethnic groups such as the Oromo from the South, the Afar from the north, and the Gambela from the southwest. Abiy Ahmed rose to prominence by harnessing the insurgent aspirations of many of these suppressed minorities and bringing peace with neighboring Eritrea. A year into his premiership, however, the Nobel laureate managed to reinvent himself as a disgraced terrorist, a war criminal choking

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humanitarian supplies to the Tigré region and dubbing Tigré militants as "bandits and terrorists" – the same way the Italian treated the Mesazgi brothers – who are only fit as objects of target practice for the Ethiopian military. If that was not enough, Ahmed allied with the Eritrean government to launch attacks on his own dissenting civilians in the Tigré region (a truce has been agreed upon as of November 2022). In retrospect, what was billed as a peace deal for the Nobel committee "appears to have been more of a war pact wherein Abiy invited a foreign state onto Ethiopian territory to assist him in consolidating his position."[33]

What would these entangled tales of conflict teach us about the frail syntax of terrorism? Let us begin with the bizarre twist that brings the two stories together: just like Weldegabriel was provided arms by the Ethiopian unionists of the 1950s to assist the merger of Eritrea into the union, Abiy Ahmed makes a war pact with the Eritrean elite in the guise of a peace deal to attack his own citizens who demand autonomy, branding them as a grave threat to his renewed bid for a united Ethiopia. In either case, owing much to the Manichean credo of good versus bad, legitimate versus illegitimate violence that is terminally superimposed upon nonstate combatants, the constant metamorphosis of the insurgent figures from bandits, heroes, nation-builders to terrorists in public discourses manifests itself as a semiotic deference that fails to grasp its own field of signification: the political grievances that drove these figures toward the path of violence in the first place. Weldegabriel could be entrusted by his people to bear the moral burden of settling familial or communal feuds, could affect a policy change, and even be entrusted with arms to bring a rival army into submission, but because he was deemed no more than a bandit whose skills did not exceed wanton violence, he could never be ennobled as a legitimate political figure.

Ironically, like the label "bandit" pinned on Weldegabriel's very being, the badge "Nobel Peace Laureate" on Abiy Ahmed's chest had an equally devastating effect on the Ethiopian nation. Filtered through the lens of pacifist discourses which (mis)read the internal conflict in Ethiopia, along with Eritrea, as a threat to global security, the hasty awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Abiy Ahmed has led to the obfuscation of diverse political aspirations internal to the nation. Despite their cultural or semantic effects, when used against a group of nonstate actors – as the British Colonial Office did against the Malayan insurgents – labels such as "bandit" or "terrorist" have the same perfunctory effect of unauthorizing, if not demonizing, legitimate insurgent cultures brewing within a community for a good reason. Instead of subjecting such political grievances to

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legitimate scrutiny, the draconian discourses create new brands of bandits and new breeds of Nobel Peace Prize winners like Aung San Suu Kyi, who have ironically become the icons of a new age of state terrorism. The blunt weapon of state terrorism that was handed over to the nonstate combatants has finally been returned to its source: in November 2021, nine major ethnic rebel groups, despite their internal differences and ruptures, formed an alliance in Ethiopia to overthrow the terrorist government led by a Nobel Peace Prize winner. If it takes a group of motivated insurgents to overthrow a terrorist, then what would it take to deconstruct the very idea of terrorism? What most definitions of terrorism have in common, at least the ones used by states, think tanks, and academics, are the formative elements of a syntax – subject and predicate – with the subject invariably being "the terrorist" and the predicate variously associated with "politics," "political change," "the conduct of the government," and "the policies that the agents of violence find objectionable," among others.[34] Even the most normative Anglophone definitions such as the one by the Oxford English Dictionary append the terrorist subject with the incendiary predicate: "the pursuit of political aims."[35] In the academic debates, there is no consensus on a normative definition, and some go on to argue that we are better off with a dictionary definition than a web of homespun definitions. It is for this reason that popular definitions such as "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," often filtered through iconic figures such as Nelson Mandela, Yasir Arafat, or Che Guevara, have a seductive ring to them. A major folly of these populist definitions is that they enter the realm of moral judgments, which is predicated by its own future: terrorism is good only when it is successful, when yesteryear's terrorist becomes a national hero. And when the opposite could be equally true, as in the case of Abiy Ahmed, the frail syntax of terrorism begins to unravel itself: the terrorist subject is latched to a predicative value that lies outside the linguistic spectrum of signification, and outside the temporal purview of its subject in question. None of these definitions, for instance, goes as far as to account for the predicative value accorded to terms such as "politics," "political intent," "political aims," or "another man's freedom." On the contrary, they purge their inner meaning, as though they are pure fictions, invented, it seems, on a sheer whim, or, rather, inspired by ahistorical, cultural, religious, nonsecular causes such as the desire for an Islamic State, a Sikh nation, or a tribal boundary.

The insurgent cultures showcased in this book loom out of the shambles of this residual discourse of terrorism, whose spillage can be found in, and rescued from, the obfuscated political motifs of rebels, rogues, guerrillas,

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social bandits, and revolutionaries: their origins in colonial history, their incomplete nationhood, their unfulfilled indigenous aspirations, their disrupted communal bonds, and, above all else, their perpetual exposure to the violence of another order. In such circumstances, insurgency becomes an invited violence; a momentary, splashy weapon of the weak against the juggernaut of sovereign arms. Before they arrive at the decision to flash this weapon, the insurgents – at least the ones featured in this book – are robbed of their lands, their subsistence, their identity, and every other conciliatory means at their disposal. And before they arrive at the decision to die, they contrive a ruse to flee from a world of injury to a state of divine and sublime violence. And between killing and dying, they return from exile, learn tango, wash corpses, raise families, rebuild hamlets, improve their hunting skills – they do everything to *avoid* fighting and to eke out a mere livelihood.

Notes

[1] Joel Nickels, *World Literature and the Geographies of Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 2.
2 Yasmina Khadra, *The Attack*, trans. John Cullen (New York: Random House, 2007), 69.
3 Stephen Morton, "Terrorism, Orientalism and Imperialism," *Wasafiri* 22, no. 2 (2007): 36–42, 41.
4 *Red Alert: The War Within*, dir. A. N. Mahadevan (Star Entertainment Private, 2010), 54:40–55:20; *Chakravyuh*, dir. Prakash Jha. (Mumbai: Prakash Jha Productions, 2012).
5 James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 39–40.
6 James C. Scott, "Hegemony and the Peasantry," *Politics & Society* 7, no. 3 (1977): 267–296, 289.
7 Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 280–290. See also the discussion of Wolf's and Scott's contribution to an understanding of insurgent cultures in Theda Skocpol's review essay, "What Makes Peasants Revolutionary?," *Comparative Politics* 14, no. 3 (1982): 351–375.
8 See Jane Haggis, Stephanie Jarrett, Dave Taylor, and Peter Mayer, "By the Teeth: A Critical Examination of James Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*," *World Development* 14, no. 12 (1986): 1435–1455.
9 Scott, *Moral Economy*, 4.
10 Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (Bombay: Times of India Press, 1959), 318.
11 Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999 [1983]), 51.
12 Ibid., 77.

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13 Paul George Neiman, "Camus on Authenticity in Political Violence," *European Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (2017): 1569–1587, 1583.
14 Camus, *The Rebel*, 301.
15 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1965), 48.
16 Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Abacus, 2000 [1969]), 125.
17 Ibid., 49.
18 Ibid., 51–52.
19 Tony Nwaka, Lords of the Creek (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2015), 129.
20 Jeff Conant, *A Poetics of Resistance: The Revolutionary Public Relations of the Zapatista Insurgency* (London: AK Press, 2010), 30.
21 Ibid., 100.
22 Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, trans. Johnathan Wright (London: Penguin, 2018), 146–147.
23 Conant, *Poetics of Resistance*, 101.
24 Sergei Nechayev qtd. in Wolf, *Peasant Wars*, 81, 83.
25 Hobsbawm, qtd. in Wolf, *Peasant Wars*, 80–81.
26 Wolf, *Peasant Wars*, 88.
27 Stacey Balkan, "Rogues in the Postcolony: Chris Abani's Grace Land and the Petro Picaresque," *Global South* 9, no. 2 (2015): 18–37, 29.
28 Pascal Khoo Thwe, *From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 200.
29 Charmaine Craig, *Miss Burma* (London: Grove/Atlantic, 2017), 317.
30 These are to be read more as vignettes, semi-fictional, based on the real life accounts, than fictional tales.
31 I shall treat this story as semi-fictional, which was originally documented by Eric Hobsbawm in *Bandits*, who himself is uncertain of its origins.
32 Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 5.
33 Milkessa M. Gemechu, "How Abiy Ahmed Betrayed Oromia and Endangered Ethiopia," *Foreign Policy*, January 25, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/25/abiy-ahmedethiopia-qeerroo-oromia-betrayed/. At the time of writing this, however, the Abiy Ahmed–led Ethiopian government and the Tigré insurgents have reached a peace agreement.
34 See, for instance, for a list of definitions surveyed by Jeff Goodwin: "A Theory of Categorical Terrorism," *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (2006): 2027–2046, 2029–2031.
35 Ibid.

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