Maps and Spaces

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Students of Afghan history come up against two sets of academic demarcations and appropriations. First, as Nile Green points out in his introduction to this roundtable, Afghanistan as a field of study tends to fall off the edge of the scholarly traditions associated with the regional denominations of the Middle East, South Asia, and Central Asia. Second, the tendency to view history through the lens of present-day national entities presents an impediment to historical inquiry and not only in Afghanistan. The attempt to streamline the past to fit a consistent narrative of state-building may serve to foster a national identity, yet it is of little use in gaining a deeper understanding of the political, social, and economic processes at work in a given period.

From the perspective of early modern history, I argue against the idea of an autonomous field of Afghan history. The extensive nature of early modern polities and the significance of mobility—the role of tribal elites, commercial networks, and sacred spaces—make it necessary to think beyond the restricted domains produced by modern denominations and their projection into the past.[1] For the inquiry into early modern times, concepts of embedment work better than hierarchical notions of center and periphery. The Afghan history of this period is best understood in the context of the "Indo-Persian"[2] or "Persophone"[3] realm. This approach makes all the more sense in light of the fact that the three large denominations of Hindustan, Khurasan/Iran, and Turkistan/Turan continued to provide the territorial frame of reference well into the 19th century. While the term "Afghanistan" can be traced back to the early 14th century, the formation of the modern political unit known by that name was triggered by colonial intervention.

A successful inquiry into the regional setting clearly hinges on a thorough analysis of the available Persian material. An excellent example is Robert McChesney's work on the Alid shrine of Mazar-i Sharif, which interweaves the history of the shrine proper with the changing political landscape north and south of the Amu Darya up to the 19th century.[4] More recently, I have used the example of Herat to document the transition from fluid early modern models of political cohesion to modern notions of the nation-state.[5] The Persian-narrative sources offer a wealth of information on the mechanisms of power and on the range of options open to the military elite, while women, subalterns, and ethnic groups are hardly accounted for. One aspect that deserves further attention is the link between historiography and literature in these texts. The rhetorical devices and figurative language at work have often been viewed as purely formulaic and extrinsic to the historical narrative as such. I think that they have more to offer: the topoi employed instill a sense of coherence and intrinsic order, thus bearing valuable information on literary lineages, social values, relationships of exchange, and concepts of space.

As we enter the modern timeframe, we see the continuing impact of the nationalist discourse created during the Musahiban period (1930–78). What sets the current internal

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debates apart from the Western historical perceptions is a sense of urgency and the need to appropriate the genesis and identity of the Afghan state. The unsettled question of Afghanistan's present status and its future as a political entity manifests itself in the ongoing debate about its historical origin and appropriate designation. Among Afghan scholars both inside and outside the country, the question of *whose* history is told has become ever more acute, as the non-Pashtun groups are struggling to assert their place in the national narrative. Here, the shift from the Kabul-centric, Pashtun-dominated perspective proposed in McChesney's roundtable essay is already happening, albeit within an extremely limited framework. In attempting to root their respective groups deeply in the past and to highlight these groups' contribution to Afghanistan's integrity, Pashtun and non-Pashtun intellectuals strive to establish their "ownership" of the historical narrative. I agree with Amin Tarzi's contribution here that the political sea change of the last thirty years has liberated the historical debate from the unitary narrative established in the Musahiban period. At the same time, we see many of the cornerstones of the old nationalist discourse still in place. The ongoing debate on the relationship between the Afghan state and its constituent parts continues to feed on the notion of a timeless and stable homeland and on the idea of a fixed set of "national" protagonists.

The Western historiography of Afghanistan likewise continues to adhere to blueprints established under the auspices of the Musahiban. The narrative begins with the foundation of the modern state in 1747 and, following a dynastic logic, divides the subsequent history into the Sadozai, Muhammadzai, and Musahiban periods. In the light of the difficult process of state-building, focus is laid on the ability of the monarchs to hold their ground against colonial intervention and internal ethnic and clerical adversaries. The resulting narrative consists of what Nile Green calls a "repetitive sequence of national actors": Mir Vais Hotak and Ahmad Shah Baba as plucky founding fathers, the "Iron" Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan as a fierce but able consolidator, and Amanullah Khan as a farsighted but ill-fated modernizer. Given the analytic focus on modernity versus traditionalism and center versus periphery, political change is reflected as emanating from Kabul. Despite its conceptual limitations, this approach has borne some noteworthy results. A number of studies have addressed the beginnings of journalism,[6] the development of such government instruments as constitutional law, the judiciary, and taxation,[7] and the use of religious elements in ideological discourses.[8]

While these overviews contribute to our general understanding, I agree with Nile Green and the other contributors that the "social geography" of 20th-century Afghanistan deserves further exploration. This presents at once a necessity and an opportunity. New methods need to be applied to existing material, and a wider range of sources needs to be tapped. James Caron's suggestion to step outside "the realm of a mapped time and space" is one possible approach to such an endeavor. A more modest one aims at producing composite and more comprehensive maps to capture the complex of governance, culture, and literature in all its manifestations. The composite approach may include the analysis of the establishment of government institutions and their public perception. Addressing a "middle ground" in the field between subnational and transnational actors, this line of inquiry continues to rely on official sources but offers new interpretations. An example is Benjamin Buchholz's recent work on the Loya Jirga, which illustrates the manifold manifestations of this institution and its weight in social and political discourse as read

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from a combination of government documents, newspaper coverage, and oral and written statements by participants and observers.[9]

A finely grained analysis of conventional sources may serve to close some of the gaps in the historical narrative. The recently published fourth volume of the *Siraj al-Tawarikh* by Fayz Muhammad Katib (c. 1863–1931) and the material collected in the Afghanistan Digital Library provide a wide pool of data yet to be investigated.[10] Such Kabul-centric phenomena as the debate on modernity initiated by Mahmud Tarzi (1865–1933) acquire a new significance if viewed within national and transnational contexts. On the national level, it is time to include other Afghan intellectuals who engaged in the debate. On the transnational level, the comparison with contemporaneous meta-literary texts produced in Iran and Central Asia will give a sense of the envisioned pathways to modernity and the role of Afghan littérateurs within the intellectual space created by interchanges with European ideas.[11] Another phenomenon that might enhance our understanding of the evolution of the modernist discourse in Afghanistan is the literary societies founded under government auspices in the early Musahiban period. So far, the decades prior to 1978 have merely been depicted as a prelude to the April Revolution. The memoirs written by the political actors of the time give insights into the manner in which individual perceptions are framed within larger constructions and narratives of the past.[12] This survey highlights some of the blanks *within* the historiographical map of Afghanistan. It is to be hoped that the approaches highlighted in this roundtable will be taken up in the interest of producing a composite and more intricate charting of the terrain.

NOTES

[1]On travel, both voluntary and involuntary, see R. D. McChesney's contribution to this roundtable; on the social and spatial mobility of tribal elites, see Christine Noelle-Karimi, "The Abdali Afghans between Multan, Qandahar and Herat in the 16th and 17th Centuries," in *Beyond Swat: History, Society and Economy along the Afghanistan-Pakistan Frontier*, ed. Magnus Marsden and Benjamin Hopkins (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

[2]Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3–4.

[3]Bert G. Fragner, *Die "Persophonie": Regionalität, Identität und Sprachkontakt in der Geschichte Asiens* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1999).

[4]Robert D. McChesney, *Waqf in Central Asia. Four Hundred Years in the History of a Muslim Shrine, 1480–1889* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[5]Christine Noelle-Karimi, *The Pearl in Its Midst: Herat and the Mapping of Khurasan from the Fifteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, forthcoming).

[6]May Schinasi, *Afghanistan at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century. A Study of Serâj ul-Akhbâr (1911–1918)* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1979).

[7]Jan-Heeren Grevemeyer, *Afghanistan. Sozialer Wandel und Staat im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 1990); Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Law in Afghanistan. A Study of Constitutions, Matrimonial Law and the Judiciary* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985).

[8]Ashraf Ghani, "Islam and State-Building in a Tribal Society. Afghanistan: 1880–1901," *Modern Asian Studies* 12 (1978): 269–84; Asta Olesen, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan* (Richmond, U.K.: Curzon Press, 1995).

[9]Benjamin Buchholz, *Loya Jirga: Ratsversammlung, Verfassungsorgan und Mythos* (forthcoming).

[10]Fayz Muhammad, *Siraj al-Tawarikh: Jild-i Chaharum*, ed. Muhammad Sarwar Mawlayi, 4 vols. (Kabul: Intisharat-i Amiri, 1390/2011).

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[11]For the ongoing working group on "Modernity and Modernism in Persophone Literary History" at the Institutes of Iranian Studies at the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna and at the University of Bamberg, see http://www.oeaw.ac.at/iran/german/projekt_modernity.html (accessed 14 August 2012).

[12]The multiple perspectives on the historical process since the 1940s are nicely captured by David B. Edwards, *Before Taliban* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002). For an analysis of the narrative structures of Sultan ʿAli Kishtmand's memoirs, see Andreas Wilde, "Narrative Strukturen afghanischer Geschichtsschreibung am Beispiel von '*Yāddāshthāyo Siyāsī va Rūydādhā-yi Tārīkhī*'" (master's thesis, Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg, 2004).

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