Elite Pasts and Subaltern Potentialities

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In narrating Afghanistan's 21st century, future historians might bracket the first decade with the two Bonn conferences of 2001 and 2011: great-power delegates and handpicked elite Afghans meeting to plot Afghanistan's transitional place in the international system. In contrast, Afghan popular and intellectual cultures alike have often voiced alternate histories. For example, Malang Kohistani, a contemporary working-class singer of Kabul's hinterland, sees top-down Afghan integrations into globality not as a fundamentally new construction of institutions that promise prosperity for a nation-state and its people but rather as one more intrusive disruption—in a chain of similar events beginning over 2,000 years ago with Alexander—in everyday people's continuous, bottom-up efforts to ensure their livelihoods, in part through developing horizontally organized trade networks.[1] And indeed it is not only post-2001 statist intervention that has attracted such popular responses, but this is also a longstanding critique among both urban and rural Afghan intellectuals. In some ways Malang Kohistani echoes Malang Jan, the renowned 1950s sharecropper-poet of Jalalabad, as well as various more elite authors.

Atlantic-centric and Kabul-centric perspectives have dominated the historiography of Afghanistan since the earliest colonial representations of the area, including Mountstuart Elphinstone's 1815 account. Cutting across their mutual distrust for each other, a long-standing traffic between British and Afghan officials and potentates, and an overlap of their social and political circles, led to shared perspectives at least where their hinterlands were concerned—inscribing discourses of fractious otherness onto rural populations that have rarely been shaken in either Persian or English history writing. Serious, systematic inquiry into rural lives has too frequently been substituted by abstraction-driven pronouncements on the natures of rural groups.

Academic writing has sometimes lagged behind certain practice-oriented fields such as development studies in rethinking statist perspectives and seeking broader-based local and regional social histories. For example, a 2002 report by Adam Pain and Jonathan Goodhand for the International Labour Organization (ILO) attributed the lack of basic information on Afghan livelihoods to Western assumptions about Afghanistan and Afghan administration styles that de-emphasize quantitative data.[2] At the same time, the report's introduction provided an alternate history of Afghanistan, a view centering on livelihoods and mobility and on integrating global and local positionalities, an approach also advocated by R. D. McChesney in his contribution to this roundtable.

Building on already published material, we find in the 2002 report a nuanced social-historical narrative: as urban Afghanistan has been increasingly integrated into the global economy, rural Afghanistan appears to have become progressively localized. Marginal comments from dozens of sources allow us to flesh out the picture further: from the 1930s to the 1950s, formerly mobile traders invested more frequently in land, which increased

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in price while holdings became more concentrated. Labor outmigration declined after Indo-Pakistani independence, resulting in net drains of wealth from the countryside and leading to more intensive local use of land. This contributed to environmental decline, even before the war accelerated the process. Both the "coping economy" and the borderland black markets swelled, reaching their apexes in the late 20th century.

Returning to Pain and Goodhand's remark on the lack of information on rural history, we might propose that because most archives concern the state and its foreign relations, it is natural that historians' accounts should privilege these fields. This may be the case with certain statistical data, but Pain and Goodhand's alternative account of Afghanistan's 20th century, which is based on sources that have long been available, argues against this claim where qualitative analysis is concerned. So do Robert Nichols' and R. D. McChesney's essays in this roundtable, by pointing to the steady stream of indigenous alternative narratives throughout the century. These range from the messy inconsistencies that show up in official documents such as state development plans, to writings by mildly critical state intellectuals working in literary and cultural spheres, to transcribed populist songs by the likes of Malang Kohistani and Malang Jan who enjoyed links with critical urban intellectuals, to sources such as folklore.

Sources providing different visions have always been available but are rarely accessed, indicating the influence of hegemonic conceptions of Afghan historiography rather than a problem of historical material. Imperial and globalized policy concerns fostered a sort of history-as-aspiration and obscured attention to areas of life beyond governmentality. Indeed, the more current issue is not actually a lack at all but rather a glut in particular genres of statistical information. The ILO report was produced within a transnational nongovernmental organization field that has strongly prioritized data collection, and this is yet more true of military and government bodies. Just as H. G. Raverty's sensitive 1850s work on Pashto history and philology was superseded by the imperial gazetteer, and later by databases on individuals and tribes, modern military knowledge relies on the surveillance drone that pinpoints everything in absolute coordinates but understands nothing.[3] To use Ranajit Guha's terminology, modern U.S. intervention rewrites the "primary discourse" of contingent field observations not as the first stages of history narration, or as prose at all, but rather as data for mapping actor-networks and for building ever more elaborate simulations.[4] As systems engineers earned multimillion dollar grants to convert field notes written by military-embedded social scientists into computer-simulated village models, one engineer mused in 2010 that the eventual goal could be a dynamic model of all of southern Afghanistan, realer than life.[5]

In the Anglophone academy–policy continuum, there have also been attempts to recover Afghan voices in ways that would circumvent tendencies to collapse them into data. Over the past five years, multiple conferences aimed at "rethinking the region" have been held at private, public, and military universities in the United States and the United Kingdom, including the one that inspired this roundtable. There has even been modest interest in Afghan literatures. Despite this, the difficulty of writing both broad-based and fine-grained Afghan social history has persisted. Yet why the focus on rewriting something that people have already been saying? We might find that attention to alternative Afghan social historiographies offers much to the world.

Afghan folk genres, for example, are often striking in their multidimensional expressions of subalternity, problematizing both local and global inequalities, gender,

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mobility, and representation. They do this frequently through a sort of phenomenology, a concern with casting the social in terms of its subjective experience, and even with how experience and the subject are constructed. Besides critical popular songs such as those discussed previously, ample material exists in anonymous folklore, such as the (originally) impromptu *landay* genre. Two examples from the 1940s focusing on subaltern migrations casually reflect on intimate tensions in subjectivity brought by tensions between horizontal mobility and fixed, rooted territory:

Separation has set the mountains crying;
Why do you head toward Dakka [near the Khyber Pass], where the land begins?
O Separation, look how you've cleaved us apart
We used to be like the two brains of a walnut in one shell.[6]

Such *landay* poems survive in the tens of thousands, stacked one after another without commentary in books compiled by critical state intellectuals using unspecified methodologies. In this form, they are impossible to date, and we are given little idea of who the speakers are. But what if we read them as their compilers did, as multivalent and more powerful for it? Would we gain more by leaving them as they are than by trying to embed them in history writing as evidence in service to larger arguments?

Nationalist folklore studies like *landey* compilations were often a way to represent anti-monarchist perspectives, obliquely but no less subversively for that. But do we need to reduce such collections to this? Beyond the specificities of individual poems, the principle underlying such volumes not only undermines local monarchy but also is the mirror opposite of the imperial database. Readers are gifted a hundred thousand microsnippets of interlinked, expressive voices that prioritize individual phenomenology while in aggregate teaching us much about collective Afghan pasts; yet individually these voices prove elusive to the sorts of fixity that history as a practice—or counterinsurgency, for that matter—generally require. We can learn much from such alternate orderings of social knowledge but only by stepping outside the realm of a mapped time and space and moving into the realm of history as potentiality. Indeed, a subjunctive understanding of everyday past experience as comprising ambiguous and revisitable moments of multiple potentiality, most salient in imaginings of a more humane future, is common among present-day literary writers such as Pir Muhammad Karwan, critical-popular singers like Malang Kohistani, and even some Taliban literature.

Could this line of thought risk sliding toward a presentist, antifactual extreme? The songs of Malang Kohistani and Malang Jan suggest otherwise. Both frequently remind listeners of violent events elided in elite historiography. For both men, discussing representation is inseparable from discussing actually occurring violence. And most important, Malang Jan and Malang Kohistani address transnational audiences, demanding that America and the "world of humankind" (*jahān-i bashar*) empathically engage with actually existing individual and collective memory, and with actually speaking intellectuals such as themselves who curate it, as a way to collectively imagine more humane futures from a cross-regional bottom-up vantage point. With Afghan and Anglophone histories linked in uncountable intimate ways, 21st-century Anglophone historians may decide to accept this invitation to collaborative public knowledge or not.

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NOTES

[1]For a subtitled song by Kohistani, see David Edwards' documentary *Kabul Transit* (Bullfrog Films, 2006).

[2]Adam Pain and Jonathan Goodhand, *Afghanistan: Current Employment and Socio-Economic Situation and Prospects*, InFocus Programme, Crisis Response and Reconstruction Working Paper 8 (Geneva: Recovery and Reconstruction Department, 2002).

[3]Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, "A History of Linguistic Boundary Crossing within and around Pashto," in *Beyond Swat: History, Society and Economy along the Afghanistan–Pakistan Frontier*, ed. Magnus Marsden and Benjamin Hopkins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Manan Ahmed, "Flying Blind: U.S. Foreign Policy's Lack of Expertise," *The National* (UAE), 4 March 2011.

[4]Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counterinsurgency," in *Subaltern Studies II*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[5]Farah Stockman, "Knowing the Enemy One Avatar at a Time," *Boston Globe*, 30 May 2010.

[6]Both from Muhammad Gul Nuri, *Milli Sandare* (Kabul: Da Pushto Tolana, 1944).

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