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Activism, Knowledge, and Publishing: some views from Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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Activism, Knowledge, and Publishing: some views from Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Abstract: How can academic publishers support the study of regions and fields that receive comparatively little attention within South Asia-related humanities and social sciences? Approaching this question with regard to Pakistan and Afghanistan opens a series of conceptual questions that are useful beyond these cases. Above all, we contend that support to marginal specialisations, particularly in service of making them less marginal, must involve an openness to the world beyond professional academic life. By this, we first mean an openness to different purposes for knowledge that are related to political and social stakes in countries other than India. Second, we suggest the need for a greater openness to different sources and forms of knowledge than have traditionally been admitted into academic conversation in the global north.

Keywords: Decolonising; Academic publishing; Activism; Afghanistan; Pakistan

Introduction:

The strength of the historical guild varies from one society to the next. Even in highly complex societies where the weight of the guild is significant, never does the historians' production constitute a closed corpus. Rather, that production interacts not only with the work of other academics, but importantly also with the history produced outside of the universities.¹

How can academic publishers support the study of regions and fields that receive comparatively little attention within South Asia-related humanities and social sciences? Approaching this question with regard to Pakistan and Afghanistan opens a series of conceptual questions that are useful beyond these cases. Above all, we contend that support to marginal specialisations, particularly in service of making them less marginal, must involve an openness to the world beyond professional academic life. By this, we first mean an openness to different purposes for knowledge that are related to

political and social stakes in countries other than India. Second, we suggest the need for a greater openness to different sources and forms of knowledge than have traditionally been admitted into academic conversation in the global north.

Knowledge Production across Geography and Social Domain

Since independence, Indian historiography has been shaped not only by field-internal conversations, but by the political stakes of academics and their milieus; and trends like Subaltern Studies that have been the most influential on the global stage have combined the goal of research with a normative programme. Along with a series of self-reflective debates over the global politics of knowledge, Indian-internal social and political stakes have played increasing roles in defining South Asian studies in Europe and North America since the 1970s. This is a positive development; though from the perspective of many who work in other South Asian contexts, it also seems to have led to an intensification of nation-state-driven insularity. Our conversations are not often part of *the* conversation. It is harder to imagine nowadays a case like Hamza Alavi's conception of the *salariat*, stemming from observations of the rise of the Muhajir Qaumi Mahaz: a case in which an analysis generated from within Pakistani political commitments produced field-wide interventions. But, as we argue in the remainder of this section, drawing more explicitly, rather than less, on a plurality of normative programmes could be one way to open the field to a broader plurality of regional and social perspectives.

At its basis, research and publication is *for* something: to score points within an existing academic publishing paradigm or to engage with others in the academic field;

but it also might aim to speak with the state or advise policy institutions, or to be engaged with marginalised regions and existing movements in these areas. Just as state policy-making has produced entire disciplines, other kinds of activism generate innovative questions and research agendas. There already exist debates over the need to broaden scholarly engagement through greater interaction with extra-academic publics, including activist and marginalized publics. Take, for example, the call for a public sociology, prompted after the 2004 presidential address by Michael Burawoy at the American Sociological Association. For Burawoy, public sociology “strikes up a dialogic relation between sociologist and public in which the agenda of each is brought to the table, in which each adjusts to the other.” Burawoy argued it was necessary for these “public sociologies” to “not be left out in the cold, but brought into the framework of our discipline.” In fact, Burawoy saw this institutional legitimization of public sociologies as key not only to addressing the limitations of sociology as a discipline, but as playing a crucial role in reinvigorating the discipline and propelling it towards new horizons.² Burawoy is limited in his critique of sociology’s limits—he does not question how the sources and forms of knowledge considered legitimate by the academy also determines the dialogic field, inadvertently limiting entrance to those less well-versed in this language—but he has prompted an important debate within sociology. Others have taken this further; Laurence Cox, for example, sees political engagements in movements as “significant knowledge producers and sources of epistemological innovation.”³

A series of essays and articles⁴ recently published by members of the All Pakistan Alliance for Katchi Abadis (APAKA)⁵ and the Awami Workers Party (AWP)⁶ in Pakistan can illustrate the kind of work possible if we open up academic life to a broader range of social stakes. The APAKA is a national-level alliance of *katchi abadis*, or informal settlements, agitating against state eviction threats and for the construction

of low-income housing. The current driving force behind the APAKA are residents of the *katchi abadis*, along with a core group of scholar-activists who are AWP members, in addition to being professors and lecturers in public universities like Quaid-e-Azam University or research students in Pakistan and abroad. A recent mass eviction of 20,000 residents from the I-11 *katchi abadi* in Islamabad, which included significant state violence, has not only prompted full-time engagement by scholars, but also resulted in a wave of political and theoretical reflections on space, resistance, and political subjectivity; urban planning; and political ideology. For these scholars, including one of the present authors who is a member of AWP and APAKA, political experiences generate theoretical questions that in turn re-inform political work.² For example, one scholar-activist asked, in a public forum: “What drives [... large sections of society, especially the middle classes,] to applaud the use of batons, tear gas, rubber bullets, and bulldozers against thousands of unarmed women, men, children and the elderly?” This prompted a broader question: how do “the anxieties, fears, and desires of [the] middle classes” translate into consent with state and other violence?³

Returning to the issue of greater representation for ‘marginal’ regional specialisations, questions like the above clearly resonate well beyond the borders of Pakistan. That question is translatable to other contexts in South Asia, ones in which normative activist stakes have driven research at the leading edges of very important, though polity-specific, subfields in precisely the way we advocate above—for example, in dalit and adivasi studies. Could an academic journal sponsor, say, a live forum, with an eye toward publishing the conversation, in which activists, communities, and scholars in Pakistan enter into a dialog with counterparts from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or Nepal on similar basic questions that might translate across borders more easily than more specialized work does? For a South Asia-focused academic journal,

such a forum—in which specificity is explored in individual settings but emphasis is on translatability and horizontal sharing of ideas and techniques between activists and between scholars—would increase the representation of countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh in its repertoire. It would also reverberate beyond academic circles; while lessening the gap between academic production and the world we study might help invigorate our fields.

Decolonization theorists provide inspiration here relevant to South Asianists, both in extra-academic engagement and on the question of forms of knowledge. For example Enrique Dussel, whose work in Latin American decolonization philosophy has developed in conversation with Zapatista activists in southern Mexico, criticizes Subaltern Studies for being “a reinterpretation of the history of India [...] but not sufficiently critical.”² According to Ramon Grosfoguel too, “with a few exceptions [the Subaltern Studies collective] produced studies about the subaltern rather than studies with and from a subaltern perspective. Like the imperial epistemology of Area Studies, theory was still located in the North while the subjects to be studied are located in the South.” Grosfoguel argues for moving beyond both “Eurocentric and Third World fundamentalisms”. Instead, he recommends building a broader canon of thought than the Western (or Left Western) canon; creating more critical dialogue between “diverse critical epistemic/ethical/political projects” in a “pluriversal” rather than “universal” world; and taking seriously “the epistemic perspective/cosmologies/insights of critical thinkers from the Global South, thinking from and with subalternized racial/ethnic/sexual spaces and bodies.”¹⁰ The commitment of decolonization theorists to plurality furthers the centrality of marginal territories and peoples, while enhancing the diversity of the field of theorization; this is aided by the fact that many decolonization theorists themselves move between activist, academic, and policy spheres.

Integrating concerns like these into a hybrid activist-academic forum, however, may require academic publishers to rethink their relationship to contributors and their contributions. Can this sort of forum function both for furthering academic debate and for the activism it engages? We think it can, through a reciprocal relationship in which academic publishers and those they engage with co-define questions and answers: the journal publishes innovative and impactful work, while activists gain greater access to more social domains. Some examples of these sorts of initiatives exist, in the practice of ‘militant research’¹¹ in Cairo, Buenos Aires, New Delhi and New York, for example. But these initiatives typically reflect activist efforts to integrate academic practice, not the reverse. That is why this reciprocity requires more than inviting scholar-activists who are already well-versed in the language and methods of the academy to contribute, and more than including studies of the residents of *katchi abadis*, for example. It requires an openness to a plurality of knowledge sources (collectives, poets, artists, workers, peasants) and forms (contingent and live speech; also folk songs, poems, art, stories), so as not to preclude those untrained in the forms and methods of dominant academic traditions. It requires allowing contributions in an academic publication that are neither mediated nor translated into academic form. In the next section, we argue that this is especially important in territories where the academy is far from institutionalized. Inviting ‘marginal’ regions into the centre of conversation requires new kinds of conversation.

Forms of Knowledge beyond the Academy

An openness to diversity in subject matter, and especially in interpretive methods and formats of presentation, is vital in supporting work on Pakistan and Afghanistan. If a

Pakistani intellectual lineage is to be integrated into wider discussions, those discussions must accommodate the fact that non-academic intellectual production has been a hidden mainstay of the critical academic field in Pakistan, to a greater extent than might be true of other countries. Academic life in Pakistan has historically been circumscribed by many factors, including a domestic authoritarianism related to history as ‘official conjuring,’ to adapt Ayesha Jalal’s phrase,¹² combined with strong state discipline. This continues now: earlier in 2015, letters from intelligence agencies were circulated to all public and private institutions in Punjab, warning that academics would be best served by focusing on the Pakistan Studies curriculum and limiting ‘anti-national’ and ‘anti-cultural’ inquiry by their faculty. In the wake of assassinations of critical intellectuals like Sabeen Mahmud, seemingly killed for organising public events about disappeared persons in Balochistan, or, earlier, intellectuals like Saba Dashtiyari in Balochistan, such threats do not feel empty.

Against such a historical backdrop, alternate forms of expression have provided generations of Pakistani academics with their society’s most fertile indigenous critical genealogy of thought regarding authoritarianism and anti-hierarchy; labour, land and water as commons; cultural code-switching in official and unofficial domains; intersections of subalternity and regionalism; and many other issues. Emerging from the One-Unit period of authoritarian political and cultural centralisation, forcible technical modernisation, and elite concentration of capital under the military dictatorship of Ayub Khan, academic life had been constrained in the ways and extents that it could address such matters. But building on a critical tradition that arose in Punjabi literature during One-Unit, the 1970 play *Takht Lahore* by poet and literary scholar Najm Husain Syed addressed *all* the above issues through the epic of Dulla Bhatti, a sixteenth-century peasant rebel leader. The play was framed not by academic commentary, but by the oral

poem transmitted by *mirasis* about Dulla, *Dulle di Var*, which Najm Husain recognised for what it was: an instantiation of a tradition of informal popular critical thought, and one which is impossible to describe as subaltern because it actually held greater purchase than official academic historiography. Popular media and academic literature were mutually-reinforced by other domains: Major Ishaque of the Mazdoor Kissan Party also combined literary form with political analysis in his important plays *Quqnu* and *Mussali*; the former is a 1976 adaptation of the Dulla Bhatti legend.

In an unpublished thesis, Sara Kazmi argues that this cultural production reflected a political and ideological analysis that was part of a larger political project, rather than an essentialist Punjabi ethos.¹³ Virinder S. Kalra and Waqas M. Butt, in their contribution to a special issue of this journal on Punjabi radicalism, make a similar argument.¹⁴ While these analyses have been translated for the academy, the critical potential of popular media is what drives them. Across Pakistan, innumerable similar cultural products do not directly take part in academic debate until individual scholars take an interest in translating them into the conversation; but are themselves critical media that inform academics and activists alike. The plays mentioned above continue to be staged by students of various universities in Punjab for their critical value, as does the sufi romance *Hir Waris Shah* for its still-relevant deconstructions of patriarchy, religious authority, and caste. Could an academic publication make space for such things *without* mediation and translation, perhaps placing them in dialog with similar work from across South Asia, *and* with academic work, in a more egalitarian configuration?

In the case of Afghanistan, it seems that this is possible. A colonial legacy leading to a modern rentier state had enclaved intellectual life in the capital from most

of society, in forms of knowledge and in social circles, as Shah Mahmoud Hanifi observes.¹⁵ Decades of war and ideology-heavy foreign intervention from multiple sides have detached Afghan academic culture from global professional academic culture too. And the latest wave of intervention and liberal peace-building has also actively discouraged the development of professional history and social sciences. One example of this is the removal of what is frequently a primary domestic market of professional academic research: in 2012, the new editions of Afghanistan's high school history textbooks, paid for in part by a US army Commander's Emergency Response fund and drafted with the help of local cultural advisors to US forces, simply left out all history and social sciences relating to post-1973 events.¹⁶ Why? The ideologically contentious 1970s prefigured the 1980s and 1990s, in which Afghanistan was split by conflicting local-communitarian and global-ideological interests, and much of society was divided into and between these militarised camps. Academic life and the knowledge it produced were also fractured along geopolitical lines of power that translated into local ones. Social knowledge always involves political stakes; here the phenomenon was more explicit than usual, to the point where even the idea of neutrality is unthinkable.

This remains the case. Since 2001, global academic life has reached out in Afghanistan to the new neoliberal technocrat sphere that mediates Afghanistan for the international community. But the influence of this enclave, sometimes called 'the Kabubble', has been viewed with suspicion by many sectors of society; and not only socially conservative ones. Even Afghan members of this sphere sometimes actively critique the premises of the same liberal peacebuilding milieu that gives rise to their form of expression.¹⁷

If we as self-reflective scholars wish not to exacerbate existing divides, we must reach out to more circles in Afghanistan with a broader variety of mediatory structures. This is not difficult. Academic life has lost much of what purchase it had in wider Afghan society but ‘non-guild’ sites of history and social knowledge have remained resilient and dynamic, and there are indications, as one would expect, that new plural intellectual fields are emerging from these diverse sites. A 2010 seminar on the subject of the poet Tawakkul, and that seminar’s proceedings, are instructive.¹⁸ Tawakkul was among the most popular poets of the late nineteenth century and like other poet-saints in South Asia, his corpus was produced through the active engagement of his entire community of devotees. In Tawakkul’s case this included urbanites and farmers composing in Persian; Afghan farmers as well as mobile Afghan traders in India who composed in Pashto and Urdu; and upland farmers and pastoralists who composed in Pashai: a set of languages in the high valleys throughout eastern Afghanistan that were not written until 2003, after a Pashai militia leader rose to success in the post-2001 state and Pashai gained some political patronage as a byproduct. The 2010 seminar was sponsored by another Pashai activist, Zamane Kolmani, in concert with the Directorate for Information and Culture and a semi-independent academic publisher, Bayhaqqi.

The cause behind the seminar was activist, promoting the visibility of a minority defined as much by its high-altitude rural lifestyles as by its diverse dialects. And this activist cause was inseparable from the practical results of the seminar and its proceedings: studying the interlingual Tawakkul tradition allows a participative upland history that engages plural oral and literate forms of knowledge amid ongoing social change, without necessarily subordinating some forms to others. The proceedings are uniquely polyvocal. Some contributions preserve the orality of the speeches, a tacit acknowledgement that for many, knowledge does not exist without embodied context.

One contribution blends oral and literate codes from Pashto, Persian, and Pashai to produce a speech somewhat understandable to speakers from all communities: a unique approach in form, at least, to the communalism that hindered top-down, military-technocratic efforts at constituting Afghan historical knowledge. And many contributions are rooted in what are now marginalised as the ‘religious’ disciplines, but which might better be labeled as Islamicate or Persianate liberal arts. These cultivated traditions accommodate the hybrid forms of authority and knowledge that characterised the oral Tawakkul tradition all along, far better than educated western genres might manage to do. Some contributions are reminiscent of entries in a *tazkira*, the biographical dictionary genre that forms an important form of historiography in the Islamicate world. Some include poetic passages not as evidence but as interpretive commentary. And elsewhere, new original poetic selections stand on their own as intellectual contributions to the conversation.

In conclusion we might look at Tawakkul with an eye toward future academic publishing. The Afghan situation supplies a potential ‘post-postcolonial’ model that re-engages society on radically plural terms. For the purposes of this journal’s current roundtable, we ask: can academic publishing in Europe and North America engage and strengthen a trend that products like the Tawakkul publication might start, just as academic publishing might engage social and political stakes elsewhere in South Asia that are mediated through more familiar publication structures? The Afghan case raises, unusually clearly, a question important throughout the global south: even if we don’t wish to align with specific activist causes, many of us seek to avoid implication *by default* in promoting the exclusive dominance of forms of knowledge that are tied to specific ongoing international intervention as well as to inherited colonial forms. *Shouldn’t* there be a forum in which we can invite the input of these and other still-fluid

milieus of intellectual life, milieus that result from ongoing negotiations and hierarchies of social interests that are different than those histories of the global north that gave rise to the publication structures that organise academic life today?

In the contemporary world, there are more ways than ever to accommodate such input; and technology can aid in the reciprocity between academic publishing and social life that we find so important. Hybrid print and digital modes of publication mean that we can present articles that are enhanced by participative oral media online, or critical oral media that are enhanced through their articulation to scholarly networks and translators, depending on how one approaches the assemblage. In Pakistan, the Umang collective provides an online interface for a loose interlinked collective of activists, folk intellectuals, and ethnographers, exploring multimedia poetic knowledge as a potential site for a non-teleological horizontal alterpolitics of culture; while the online magazine *Tanqeed*, of which one of this essay's authors is co-founder, places academics and journalists in multilingual conversation with broader circles of intellectuals who produce knowledge in Urdu and regional languages.¹⁹ Innovative scholarship can even stem from user-contributed analysis, citizen journalism, and testimony, as has been the case with the Cairo-based collective Mosireen; or from scholars' attempts to package knowledge in forms that are useful to activists in communities who would not ordinarily access scholarly material, as with the South African History Archive.

Of course, these sorts of projects are not without considerable difficulties, including technological difficulties; ethical issues of protecting contributors, as well as issues involved in actively supporting certain interests and not others; and even issues of rigour. What does peer review look like, in cases where a challenge to hegemonic thinking and acting is itself part of the point? What would, or should, constitute rigour

in a situation like the Tawakkul seminar proceedings—a situation in which oral customs of polyglot fluidity, the authority of an individual’s live speech, and equal-access anonymous authority to speak in a poetic voice, all meet the fixity of western modes of citation as well as the highly specific modes of poetics, logic, argumentation, and chains of oral and written citation that developed in the Islamicate liberal arts? This may be, in part, the answer to its own question: our approach suggests looking for plural modes of publicness and publishing, intellectual authority and authorship as they develop in their own intellectual fields, even in ones where commitment to processes of antihierarchy is itself a form of authority-in-action. We suspect, in the end, that subjecting our own academic practices to other such modes of self-examination, hybridizing our own modes of citation on a case-by-case basis with those of our interlocutors, can potentially create more, rather than less, rigour, in addition to inclusive plurality.

Notes:

1 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 19.

2 Burawoy, "For Public Sociology."

3 Cox, "Movements Making Knowledge", 956.

4 See e.g. Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, 'Two Operations', *Dawn*, 31 July, 2015; Fizzah Sajjad, 'The Case of Islamabad: Building for the builders?' *Invisible Cities / Tanqeed*, 2015; Ahsan Kamal, 'The truth about katchi abadis' *The News*, 6 April, 2014; Jaqueline Beruman, 'Of collective punishment and dubious excuses' *The Express Tribune*, 5 April, 2014; Jaqueline Beruman, 'Waiting for the bulldozers', *The Friday Times*, 7 Aug 2015; Umair Javed, 'An anti-poor society', *Dawn*, 3 Aug. 2015; Hashim bin Rashid, 'Demolition State', *Dawn*, 1 Aug. 2015.

5 See <https://www.facebook.com/AllianceforKachiAbadis>

6 See <http://awamiworkersparty.org/>

7 Thank you to the residents of I-11 as well as the scholar-activists involved in the anti-eviction efforts in Islamabad for their insights and for their political work.

8 Ahsan Kamal, 'Fighting the shanties'. Online; n.p.

9 Dussel, 'Philosophy of Liberation'. Online; n.p.

10 Grosfoguel, "Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies", 3.

11 See e.g. "The Militant Research Handbook | Now! Visual Culture" <http://www.visualculturenow.org/the-militant-research-handbook/> (Accessed September 6, 2015). Also see Colectivo Situaciones, Buenos Aires; Observatorio Metropolitano (OM), Madrid; Mosireen, Cairo; Sarai and RAQS Media Collective, New Delhi; TIDAL: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy, New York.

12 The phrase refers to the title and argument of Jalal's essay, "Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining"

13 See Kazmi, "Language as Class."

14 Kalra and Butt, "'In One Hand a Pen in the Other a Gun'".

15 This is a major part of the argument in Hanifi, "Quandaries of the Afghan Nation".

16 A.H. "Textbooks for Afghanistan: Not yet History." *The Economist*, 28 Nov. 2012. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2012/11/textbooks-afghanistan> (Accessed 31 Aug. 2015)

17 One example is the Afghan Institute of Strategic Studies. This security think-tank's annual workshop on 'humane security' is developing a 'Herat School' of security studies, the goal of which is to critique the concept of 'liberal peace' using dynamic Islamicate and Persianate critical resources rooted in alter-cosmopolitan ontologies.

18 See *Majmū'a-i Maqālāt...*; the proceedings have no listed editors though it is stated that the conference took place under the sponsorship of Kolmani.

19 See www.umangpoetry.org; www.tanqeed.org

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