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ROUNDTABLE

Why Decenter the "War on Terror" in Histories of the "War on Terror"?

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When I first began my doctoral work on Afghanistan, and up until quite recently, I had never wanted to write about war. I began my PhD only a month before 11 September 2001, but already the field had been so overdetermined by war—by ideas of political Islam, by the political economy of violence—that I resolved to write a thesis about vital unanswered questions regarding Afghanistan's longer history. Of course I grew to regard this strategy of ignoring war as both naive and morally indefensible. For quite a while, this shaped my teaching more than my research. In my classes on Afghanistan's wars and on political Islam, for instance, we address the global structures of violence head on from a variety of directions, beginning with those that Yousef Baker outlines in his contribution to this roundtable, focusing on the generative forces in US politics amid a neoliberal global context and extending to the devastating ontological destruction that Kali Rubaii discusses in her contribution. In all of this, however, students in particular—especially at an institution like SOAS that is so directly tied to the Global South—repeatedly ask: "Where are we in this? We know that this is how global violence works, but this is surely in some way about us too. And our societies are more than what Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton call 'War/Truth.'"[1] Interlocutors in Pakistan and Afghanistan during my fieldwork there made these points even more strongly.

This made me rethink, even reincorporate, some of my much earlier misgivings. Even in direct critiques of the war and of empire, an impulse to cede the basic frame of discussion to war and empire can add yet another layer of violence to the "War on Terror": it risks further undermining longer pasts and imaginable futures that were already under pressure of destruction from these same global interventions. I agree as much as anyone that the global interventions of this era must be critiqued head on. I also think we should resist helping them monopolize attention. There are ways to strike that balance that do not sink back into my naive mode of wishing it all away.

In what follows, I take a cue from two things. The first is an engagement with Pashto poetry as social theory and critique, which offers extensive perspectives not only on the violence of war, but about how war violence can and should be framed, as conceived by some of those who are its most immediate sufferers. The second is a reorientation of how to see engagement with neo-imperial liberalism during the "War on Terror," when viewed through the lens of Hazara-oriented tellings of history. In both of these explorations, I prioritize heterogenous conversation from outside the academy as a way to reorient the study of war and to drive my concerns in choosing what to write about and how. All these conversations exceed war in their narrative centers, while maintaining it as a supporting character in

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[1] Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton, "Powers of War: Fighting, Knowledge, and Critique," *International Political Sociology* 5, no. 2 (2011): 126–43.

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their plots. And they do so purposefully. Looking for that purpose and honoring it in my own writing is something I think is very important for reasons that will become clear.

War is Ontological Devastation

For some years now, my colleague Salman Khan and I have been working on poetry related to the incredibly destructive 2009 war between the Pakistan Taliban and the Pakistan Army in the Swat Valley, Pakistan; much of what follows is a restatement of the key argument in our 2022 article based on fieldwork with Swati poets.[2] In the decade leading up to that war, General Pervez Musharraf purposefully built a US-supported policy of "enlightened moderation" as a local microcosm of the global "War on Terror." Civil society and liberal media in Punjab and Karachi flourished under "benevolent dictatorship"; meanwhile, this was cast in strong contrast to the conditions of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP; now renamed Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa). In Pakistan, the central state's domestic anti-national enemy had traditionally been "ethnic separatists," those arguing for regional identities against normative visions of Pakistan as a nation of pan-Islamic, modernizing, Urdu-speaking cosmopolites. But in the "War on Terror" era, as Pakistan's ruling army chose the "with us" side of George W. Bush's proclamation that all nations would either be "with us or with the terrorists," this internal other started being supplemented by the figure of the "religious extremist."[3] And the NWFP had just elected a religious party coalition, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), to the provincial legislature. This confirmed metropolitan Pakistan's coalescing self-image as liberal, enlightened, and tolerant in contrast to "those fanatics up there," and that in turn fostered support for increasingly violent interventions upon Pakistan's own northwestern citizens.

In Swat during this period people experienced a very sharp erosion of their ability to be heard: there was a loss of recognition outside of Swat of their history and culture. And a national-scale reduction of Swat to the violent "now"—erasure of any connections to prior individual and collective modes of life—was complicit in something more immediate that poets noted, in interviews and poems, as a tactic of war among both the Taliban and the army. Poet after poet said that the army and the Taliban alike rarely used human language at all to communicate with the general population. They relied on effect instead, using material violence to reshape the physical landscape into something unrecognizable. As Kusha Sefat argues in his work on language and materiality in wartime postrevolutionary Iran, this had the effect of removing the referents that everyday language of the past had signified.[4] To what end? In Swat, our poets posited, material violence was deliberately aimed at removing any sense of what they had understood of the world, so that armed factions could create a blank slate on which to write their own preferred futures. This tactic was aimed at cognitive breakdown, and all armed groups, even if superficially in conflict, collectively benefited at the expense of everyday people. Some poets, like Neelum Arzu, noted this even about their emotions: those she felt now were none she recognized from before, and few of *those* remained. Instead she was left to process visceral affect with no presently viable frames for it.[5]

In these conditions poetry took on a resistive quality. Multiple poets noted quite explicitly that when destruction of meaning was a war-weapon, then any form of deliberate meaning-making was itself resistance. But many also added a corollary: when they peppered conventional prewar or nonwar poetic imagery among all their new imagery exploring

[2] James Caron and Salman Khan, "Writing War and the Politics of Poetic Conversation," *Critical Asian Studies* 54, no. 1 (2022): 1–22.

[3] Tahir Naqvi, "Private Satellite Media and the Geo-Politics of Moderation in Pakistan," in Shakuntala Banaji, ed., *South Asian Media Cultures* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 109–22.

[4] Kusha Sefat, "Things and Terms: Relations between Materiality, Language, and Politics in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *International Political Sociology* 14, no. 1 (2020): 175–95.

[5] Neelum Arzu, *Da Sazuno Baran* (Mingora, Pakistan: Nur, 2018).

violent materiality, as most were doing in a new genre called *muzāḥimat* (resistance) poetry, they were consciously preserving past emotions as a way to counter this war-weapon of cognitive-emotional destruction—one that, again, aimed to remove their connection to their past selves to gain strategic supremacy over their future. When poets formed associations that successfully colonized liberal, peace-building NGOs with their own countering ethos of criticality (aimed against any and all global or local political-economic structures including empire, neoliberalism, and more), as many did, they were using those same prewar ways of feeling to preserve and construct a social world outside of War/Truth too.

So, let us extend this back beyond Swat and ask about ceding the frame too fully to the "War on Terror" at large, even in critique. Ontological devastation is a key strategy as well as technology of war, as poets and others theorize, linking material and epistemic violence in a single structural relationship. If, in the process, we privilege the violence of "now" as the center of attention, might this not contribute to more ontological devastation, and *strengthen that same weapon of war*?

Even as these poets offer critical commentary on war in ways that encompass much more, and with greater holistic sophistication, than most current academic writing about war does, they will not give it the narrative center. They focus on the "felt history" of everyday people as the story's main backbone, not war or empire or military assemblages and so on, even though these are characters too. This long-term history of feeling emphasizes people's ability to retain some sense of continuity from times past. It highlights their ability to use the rubble of the present to construct a future informed by past meanings and feelings even when (especially when) things seem so disconnected. All of the above calls to my mind Italo Calvino's closing epigram in *Invisible Cities*:

> The inferno . . . is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.[6]

This is different from a "resilience" argument, one that might celebrate objectified people from the outside as a way to gloss over neoliberal violence. Instead it recasts the center of history as heterotopia, and that is just what Pashto poets are telling us that they are doing as intellectuals.[7]

Counter-Histories Exist . . . Even if There are Problems Identifying the Inferno

A vision of history as the active search for heterotopia, informed by longer-term views, emerges too in my reading of other subalternized historical visions, although these also differ from the Pashto materials above in important respects. Here I call attention to Hazara histories in particular, which I have engaged not as a researcher but as a supervisor for various MA and PhD research projects at SOAS.

Thinking about Hazara histories makes one situate the immediate inferno of the "War on Terror" within a much longer one: one of unequal labor migration, economic and territorial conquest, and slavery. These together were constitutive of the Afghan monarchy's states of exception and its particular kinds of necropolitics that were solidified by its British-backed consolidation of absolute sovereignty in the country. This reminds me of nothing so much as

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[6] Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 165.
[7] Space precludes fuller illustrations of heterotopic practice (which is at once imagination and social organization) here; but see Caron and Khan, "Writing War"; and James Caron, "Pashto Border Literature as Geopolitical Knowledge," *Geopolitics* 24, no. 2 (2019): 444–61.

key parts of Cedric Robinson's arguments about racial capitalism, in which racialization is organic to processes of primitive accumulation, state formation, and nationhood.[8] And of course more recently the NATO occupation war opened up direct new avenues of racial capitalism (and necropolitics) that engulfed all residents of Afghanistan.[9] But at the same time, neoliberalism's universalism led to possible avenues of escape, for some. A range of recent work, including Rabia Khan's 2020 PhD work from SOAS, persistently suggests that widespread Hazara engagement with liberal institutions premised on human rights discourse, technocratic education, and more during the NATO occupation must be seen in a longer-term subterranean historiographical tradition emerging from within Hazara conversations about the past and also about the future.[10] I will expand; but first let me explain why registering this history is vitally important now.

As I write in October 2021, these same widespread engagements with neoliberal intervention have led to uncomfortable moments in the past months with some activists who are involved in circles of which I am tangentially a part. These activists take Hazara colleagues to task behind their backs for not sufficiently rejecting the institutional, lexical, and moral worlds of neoliberal intervention. Amidst a flurry of ongoing retrospective account-taking of the "War on Terror" after the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, I have seen at least some critical conversations take an "either/or" turn reminiscent, in a way, of the W. Bush years. There is a threat in these strands of critical discourse that unless one critiques and rejects everything in just the right way, one risks being pushed into categories like imperial "collaborator," a word I have noticed with dismaying frequency in semiformal conversation since August 2021. This is another risk when the "War on Terror" becomes too primary a frame and does not incorporate longer histories of people living through it: it can refract, into new thematics, some of the binary-seeking cognitive patterns that underlay the very violences that constituted it. This is of course not at all limited to the situation of Hazara colleagues in the current situation, even if that turned out to be one point of several where the theme stood out particularly starkly.

It is only when plural, and longer, historical realities are considered, that we can understand what the stakes are. In the 1928 civil war, the deposed king Amanullah Khan (r. 1919–29) received ample Hazara support as a result of his (formal, legal) abolition of slavery, and also for his larger statist, positivist, and future-oriented universalism. The latter, at the time, seemed like it promised to break some of the local and regional power relations that institutionalized and replicated past oppressions in structural form. Engagement with internationalized processes, knowledge systems, institutions, and routes of political access and agency during the layered sovereignties of the "War on Terror" might be seen in a similar way. Indeed for many of Rabia Khan's far more recent Hazara interlocutors, at least, all these episodes are part of a single long-term cultural history, one in which Hazara activists subsume the messianic futurity of present-day liberal imperialism into their own, less teleological visions, ones born amid oppression and aimed not at one fixed goal so much as at constant escape from the oppressions of that past. Even in critiquing imperial war, giving war the center risks ceding ground to neoliberalism's self-totalizing air of inescapability—the illusion that no space-time exists outside it—and risks erasing subaltern visions of continuous survival and reconstitution. And in that claim I again cite Robinson's arguments on racial capitalism, but in their role as backdrop to his other story, that of what he calls the Black radical tradition, in which cumulative subaltern life as critical-thought-in-action is an

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[8] Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Penguin, 2021).

[9] For example, Fatima Mojaddedi, "Terrestrial Things: War, Language, and Value in Afghanistan" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2016); and Jennifer Fluri and Rachel Lehr, *The Carpetbaggers of Kabul and Other American-Afghan Entanglements* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2017).

[10] See Melissa Kerr Chiovenda, "Hazara Civil Society Activists and Local, National and International Political Institutions," in Nazif Shahrani, ed., *Modern Afghanistan: The Impact of 40 Years of War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018), 251–70; and Rabia Khan, "On Marginality and Overcoming: Narrative, Memory and Identity among British Hazaras" (PhD thesis, SOAS University of London, 2020).

essential world-building substrate for later critique.[11] In Robinson's study, this led to fusions of grassroots knowledge with Marxism, and here with liberalism—and certainly not only.[12] And in both, the substrate remains a generative force. Wider failures to acknowledge such a possibility in flat histories of the violence of "now" have led numerous colleagues from Afghanistan, Hazara and otherwise, to complain in frustration privately or publicly of late: "why are we unjustly seen as supporting occupation (that is, seen as part of the inferno) just because we may also have a range of other emphases and strategies that have long mattered to us just as much?"

Hazara history is a specific case, but one that fits in a general ethos of stringing together counter-histories. Such counter-histories may be intimately textured by Calvino's inferno, but they are built from elements that have consistently been seeking "not-inferno" all along, and they place present elements into long-term, actively willed, community visions of another world. Local people don't have the luxury of working—living, really—only in the mode of denouncing empire in the past or now. So this ethos reorients what inferno is, while privileging histories of not-inferno.

For me, this all means that the past, from well before the "War on Terror," is vital. It means we should locate the "War on Terror" within longer histories that not only look at the past but that take into account the moral significance of keeping alive plural pasts for the imagination of the present and future. Again, nothing here is a call to avoid critical analysis of the "War on Terror," or neoliberal empire more broadly, much less to ignore them. None of the visions above do that. It is instead a suggestion to think about perspectives that might temporally and sociopolitically provincialize the "War on Terror," and to do so to also pay attention to the subterranean things that connect past and future across the devastation of the present—a suggestion to keep in constant mind what academic or activist writing amid and against inferno actually does in conversation with *plural* histories, so as not to contribute to the devastation even further.

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[11] Robinson, *Black Marxism*.

[12] For instance, the long-term Hazara engagement with Maoism and other Global South–oriented modes of leftism also is part of this same history in popular memory, although little is available on this in English.