

EthnoScripts

ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR AKTUELLE
ETHNOLOGISCHE STUDIEN

The Fall of Kabul in 2021: Background, Effects, Resonance
Der Fall Kabuls 2021: Hintergründe, Effekte, Resonanzen

Volume 24 Issue 1 | 2022

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Ground War: Soil, Supplements, and Suffering in Afghanistan

Ethnoscripts 2022 24 (1): 201-218

eISSN 2199-7942

Abstract

This paper considers the place of the earthen ground in modern and modernist Afghan history and its relation to contemporary violence. I undertake an analysis of the place of the ground in twentieth century developmental schemes; the relationship between synthetic fertilisers and explosive devices; and the resurgence of corporeal and social violence. By considering the role of agricultural practices – like the use of synthetic and nitrogenous fertilisers – and connecting these to the contemporary proliferation of military grade landmines and improvised explosive devices, I argue that the ground extends both conflict and corporeal destruction in unpredictable ways. Using the supplement as conceptual lens, I reveal how modern supplements introduced into the ground have become a source of the ground's contamination and of dismembered bodies, which are themselves in need of prosthetic aid.

Publisher:

Universität Hamburg
Institut für Ethnologie
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eISSN: 2199-7942



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Ground War: Soil, Supplements, and Suffering in Afghanistan

Fatima Mojaddedi

Introduction

In an intimate interview, a middle-aged man living in Kabul described how he came to depend on an ill-fitting prosthetic leg, which he sometimes took off and propped against his stall in one of the city's open-air markets. He described the prosthesis as a crude tool and recalled the traumatic event that led to his injury when he unwittingly walked over a landmine buried in a large field in the countryside:

I was walking one afternoon, just looking to see what I could scavenge. I had not been walking for more than 30 minutes or so; I was enjoying the experience, and the weather was so beautiful that day. There were some other people around but not too close by. I was hoping to find some abandoned tools or other things to keep. Then suddenly everything went dark, and I felt an indescribable pain and had a sensation of heat. I do not know what happened or how I ended up in a hospital, but that is when they told me I had lost part of my leg and the rest would be cut off too.¹

Like many Afghans, this man had suffered a form of violence that is all too common. The traces of this violence can readily be seen in Kabul and elsewhere. Yet it is rarely considered as a structural feature of war tied to both practices of destruction and to modernist ambition. For much of the twentieth century the Afghan terrain has been the scene of intense contestation, but in recent decades it has been subject to landmine devastation and become the scene of explosive violence that maims countless Afghans and destroys agricultural production. This has led to the increased dissemination and use of synthetic fertilisers which now comprise the chief ingredient of improvised explosive devices and enable fresh cycles of violence and death.

The explosive power of the ground, coupled both with a history of modernist goals and with war and counterinsurgency, make the examination of the ground a particularly telling case for exploring the relationship between developmental ambition, war, and bodily violence. Decades of aerial bombing and the dissemination of military grade landmines, in conjunction with improvised explosive devices used by numerous groups, have created a sit-

1 Interview with author, May 2013.

uation one man described to me as an endless death trap. But what does it mean to consider the earthen ground as a site of physical and historical destruction? How would such an analysis resonate with the understanding that structural and everyday violence are inseparable and that their tie bears greater and more devastating consequences in places repeatedly subject to military destruction and counterinsurgency campaigns? And what happens to the bodies and limbs which are subject to this violence and to the necessity of prosthetic enhancement?

These questions guide this essay and my analysis of the place of the ground in new forms of material and corporal violence. These practices are enabled by historical interventions in the ground, especially the attempt to increase its productivity, but which instead littered it with explosives and created an uncontrollable form of physical crisis. But to understand how the ground has merged with devastating forms of bodily violence – a violence that, I argue, is a perversion of the insistence that the ground become more productive – we must also consider the modernist aims that took the form of direct intervention on and in the ground.

To summarise the argument of this paper: In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were a range of projects which fantasised over the Afghan terrain as a potential source of profit and windfall gain. They range from early nineteenth-century botanical missions to later prospecting efforts, large-scale mining endeavours, and agricultural development schemes. These ambitions all share the idea that the ground is a potential and natural source of profit. Their political force shaped developmental programmes, the policies of various Afghan governments, urban-rural relations and migration, ideological movements, and, in more recent decades, the nature of military conflict and insurgency campaigns.

The obsessive writings and journal entries of imperial botanists resulted in a common representational practice of reading the Afghan landscape as the extended scene of unrealised economic potential. In imperial and Afghan discourses, the depiction of agrarian and sociopolitical failure became indelibly linked to the perception of rural places as sites of lack and non-productivity and, in turn, linked them to the expectation of military intervention and the intensification of violence. This is particularly palpable in the writings of the Afghan journalist and thinker Mahmud Tarzī (1865–1933) who depicted the ground as site of generalised anticipation: of technology, of imperial invasion, and of the consolidation of the Afghan State and its monopoly over violence.

For centuries the ground has been deeply identified with the political and economic idea of a modernist revival and as part of the discourse and political economy of late development. This has enabled new and uncontrollable forms of violence and physical crisis. This ‘prosthetic crisis,’ as I call it, has a double significance: it reveals the body as a redoubled site of violence and

loss, first through the force of an explosive event and then through repeated amputation and prosthetic fitting; and it exemplifies the place of the contaminated ground in disseminating the physical violence of war in uncontrollable ways.

Back to ground

There is a robust literature on conflict and modern warfare. It ranges from the role of the image and real time televisual representation (Baudrillard 1995) to practices of global targeting and secrecy in the era of aerial and atomic bombing (Chow 2006; Masco 2006, 2014; Saint-Amour 2000, 2003; Sebald 2004), new discourses of counterinsurgency (Weber 2005), sensitive readings of the role of photographs and torture in the Global War on Terror (Morris 2007), and ethnographies of the place of the body in political and military formations (Feldman 1991; Aretxaga 1995). These nuanced analyses illustrate the ways in which modern warfare has produced new visual cultures, targeting practices, and political subjectivities. They grant insight into the ways representational, prison, and aerial violence disown the destruction they create while positing the body and body politic as a continuous object of political and military intervention.

Parallel to these phenomena is a different kind of structural transformation which is inseparable from events that transpire on the ground and, more importantly and destructively, from the ground itself. In part this is a feature of the Afghan state's attempt to consolidate its rule in a vast countryside, where historically it faced challenges to its sovereignty. But it is also part of a modernist discourse on the productivity of the ground and the chemical supplements disseminated to enhance its fertility. As we see later, this intervention caused an uncontrollable proliferation of violence by landmines and improvised explosive devices as part of the everyday, often in the form of smaller, uncontrolled explosions that extend to sites with no direct relationship to practices of wartime targeting or fantasies of precision.

Haphazard explosions materialise the indiscriminate violence of war and structure the nature of the accident as both an event and a corporal rupture distinguished as much by its randomness as by being embedded in daily life. For example, consider the ground in and around modern Bagram, a city whose material and mythological history has been reduced to a metonym for the largest base of the United States (US) military in Afghanistan. Bagram is explosive in precisely this sense. Local Afghans living in Bagram search the ground for treasured scraps of metal and for the unexploded ordinances or mines that are littered across its extended plains, especially in a grassy unmarked area the US military calls 'the East River Range'. Perhaps more so than anywhere else in Afghanistan, the ground in Bagram is perilous. Rockets ranging from Hellfire missiles to 2.75-inch mortars and 40 mm grenades

are the strewn remainders of battle simulation and war practice sessions – mock battles that entail thunderous Apache helicopters flying overhead and indiscriminately firing explosives onto the sandy terrain. Much earlier, before it became a site of military violence and detention, Bagram was famous for its silver mines that were at the heart of its spatial economy, much like explosive landmines and legacies of torture constitute its modern pathos.² Like the city of Bagram, the word *mine* is a double gesturing towards the shared history of warfare and mining, of empire and metal. That historical and etymological duality, and the dispossession it entails, is literally inhabited in a dangerous simultaneity when Afghans go to minefields (and surrounding grasslands) to feed their livestock and to search for the scrap metals they sell in local bazaars for one dollar per fifteen pounds (Sieff 2012).

Bagram is one of the places in Afghanistan that exemplifies a mode of violence that is not characterised by conventional bombing or symptomatic of a militarised visual field but instead exemplifies a matter of the earth and the discourse on its productivity. It signals a form of terrestrial violence and is part of a much longer legacy in the twentieth century of the Afghan ground and the violence of experience that subtends the production of surplus economic value tied to a natural element; a situation Marx described in general terms as living in a “topsy-turvy world.” (Marx 1992: Chap. 48). What, then, does it mean to be on the surface of this ground? To scavenge on a precarious surface for scrap metal, second-hand goods, firewood, or plastics is like mining the metallic underground: it is to risk the very ground one stands on and to become attuned to a source of bodily catastrophe precisely when it is too late (Morris 2008). At the same time, the surface of the ground has become a kind of limit, a surface from whence an underground of riches can be accessed as part a distorted economic future, and the idea, long dispelled in political economy, that natural resource extraction can enable governance and social control.

This idea has been championed by the Afghan government, during the Karzai and Ghani eras, the US Pentagon, the US Geological Survey, the China Metallurgical Group Corporation, India Steel, the Central Asian Mining Services, and other multinational corporations; and it now constitutes part of the Taliban’s overtures to the Chinese and Pakistani governments and their aim of completing the coveted Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India

2 The military sense of the word *mine* is born of the fourteenth century practice of tunnelling underground to destroy enemy positions. This was a successful tactic used during the Battle of Ghazni by British forces in 1839. It signifies a form of underground and overground warfare as much as it does hard labour and a desire for economic profit.

(TAPI) pipeline project.³ Moreover, the discourse of a resource or pipeline boon is inseparable from the underground: asbestos, talc, magnesite, barite, bauxite, celestite, chromite, clay, glass and graphite, copper, iron, lead and zinc, lapis lazuli, emeralds, loda gold, pegmatite, placer gold, sedimentary copper, sedimentary iron, sedimentary lead and zinc, gas, and oil are believed to reside in such quantities here that it would transform Afghanistan into a dramatic node in the international market for natural resources, linking it to multinational corporations via a network of technological transfer, military, and scientific expertise.

But to understand the importance of the ground in modern Afghan history, we need to understand its place in a much longer attempt to ground economic and political control. This control is irreducible to, but certainly includes decades of military violence and interests, sometimes converging and at other times being at odds, that were part of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century experience of speculative and extractive violence. This violence was entwined in global projects ranging from botanical, coal, iron, and railway prospecting missions to later efforts at gold, marble, copper, and rare earth mineral mining. These practices were themselves part of a more extended scene of scientific curiosity which focused, at times obsessively, on the landscape as the scene of bareness and natural wonder and which inscribed political anxiety in discourses on the terrain.

Under the auspices of the Geological Survey of India, the political aims of the British Empire were written into the understanding of ground. Although embodied in the language of scientific observation and inquiry, they were part of a more general ideological effort to subdue borderland disturbances during a time of heightened alarm over political revolt on the frontier. In 1872 Dr W. T. Blanford of the Geological Survey of India, travelling with the Persian Boundary Commission, visited coal mines near Hir and Elburz (in present day Iran) and noted their excellent quality. He remarked that his travels, which ‘form the groundwork’ of his writings, resulted from heightened alarm over political revolutions ‘in the lands of immediate neighbours on the West; an interest naturally heightened by progressive encroachment

3 In the contemporary moment, extractive capitalism is once again gaining ground and national interest in Afghanistan, particularly the TAPI project which has received renewed commitment from the Taliban. At the same time, the US has lost both legitimacy and political leverage in the area. Other regional shifts favour strong ties with China, Russia, and Turkey, some of which have been institutionalised in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a political and economic alliance between the Central Asian republics, Russia, China, India, and Pakistan, with Afghanistan as an observer state. Moreover, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor envisions projects ranging from energy supplies to infrastructural to transit and port access (including the port of Gwadar in Baluchistan where the Chinese government has invested billions of dollars) and the multi-trillion-dollar Belt and Road initiative which would link China via road and maritime routes to much of the world.

from without, affecting all faith in those frontiers which, next to our own, it is of the greatest importance to us to keep inviolate'.⁴

There are other representational practices through which these perceptions shaped and reshaped the experience of political life. They included, on the one hand, the Afghan modernist idea (developed in the writings of Mahmud Tarzī) and European colonial identification of the ground with the intensification of violence and, on the other, capitalist profit. This duality was part of a political and linguistic history of representation which turned the ground into a site of generalised anticipation in the collective unconscious: of new words and discourses; of oral and written propaganda; of technology (like telegraph poles and stations); of invasion (on its British–Indian and Russian frontiers); of the ingress of the central state (through new fiscal and land tenure policies in the countryside); and even of the liberation of women from patriarchal gender relations when proceeds from land tax were used to construct schools for women in Kabul.

At the same time, the spectre of agrarian failure and the discourse of agricultural rehabilitation emerged as a kind of pastoral overhaul which increasingly enhanced the general aims of Afghan modernism and state-led developmental efforts. In a discursive sense, then, the significance of the ground as unexplored terrain and a political metaphor in Afghanistan was itself part of the power of dissemination writ large. This included representational practices, in scientific and travel reports from as early as the nineteenth century, that focused on the barren but ultimately redeemable quality of the land; and, later, reflections on the general distribution of agricultural resources and the fantasy of economic value buried underground.

In this context, rural milieus were imagined as immune to both written law and governmental order. Eventually, they became the site of the dissemination of synthetic fertilisers, both remedy and poison, to make the ground fertile in the absence of other forms of governance or development. But this also enabled a range of explosive possibilities. Thus, whether in the imperial discourses of botanists who saw unrealised potential or in the modernist Afghan discourses that saw agrarian and sociopolitical failure, the imagination of the Afghan terrain has been indelibly linked to the perception of rural life as a site of non-productivity and of lack in one of its most consequential forms.

The supplement

During the twentieth century, communication technology was used to buttress the political aims of the Afghan government and, later, the intellectual goals of Afghan modernists and literati. The history of this technology (which is outside the scope of this essay) is inextricable from efforts by the Afghan

4 British Library, India Office Records, Persian Boundary Commission (1876), p. ix.

state to extend itself outside of major cities. It is also the story of the earthen ground. As we have seen, in the imperial and botanical imagination, Afghanistan was the site of agricultural failure and aridity, becoming for British naturalists and military officers an opportunity for imperial pedagogy and, later, for Afghans the extended scene of socio-economic aspiration. But the ground, like in other places, was not peculiar because of its vegetation, soil, or glacial slopes but because of the problem of nitrogen absorption in crops which inhibits photosynthesis. This much larger and global problem resulted in the discovery of a powerful chemical supplement in the form of an inorganic fertiliser. This discovery, in turn, led to new modes of resisting the state's monopoly on violence when the bomb making capacities latent in fertilizer was used in bomb-making technologies.

At the start of World War I, when the discourse and project of Afghan modernism had achieved a feverish pitch, the limits of organic fertilisation – owing to the quick dissipation of nitrogen during crop growth – presented what appeared to be an insurmountable chemical problem. It carried the possibility of global famine as the world's population and agricultural demand continued to surge.⁵ In this context, the labours of the German chemist Fritz Haber culminated in his famous Haber-Bosch method for synthesising ammonia from nitrogen. Haber would go on to receive a Nobel Prize for this work in 1918. His method turned nitrogen from a diatomic element in the atmosphere to an instrument of agricultural reproduction, into the literal possibility of 'food from air', a possibility that became a violent and ironic spectacle of humanitarian relief during the early months of the Afghan–American War when food packages were dropped from military aircraft alongside bombs.⁶

Nitrogen contains within its name one of its most important properties: *-gen*, from the Greek *genēs*, to be born. Its chemical base 'nitro' (or sodium carbonate) is grounded in the expectation of reproduction and of additional chemical possibilities born of this primal compound. It was precisely this possibility that was realised within six years of the discovery of nitrogen when Haber was commissioned by the German military to deploy the Haber-Bosch method for weapon-making purposes. He transformed his discovery of ammonia synthesis into the world's first weapon of mass destruction, chlorine gas, stored in paint canisters and delivered to the German trenches at Ypres, Belgium. Opened on 22 April 1915 when the wind blew in the direction of the enemy trenches, these rudimentary canisters introduced

5 Prior to the discovery of ammonia synthesis, manure and sodium nitrate (Chile saltpetre, which was mined in vast quantities in Chile and shipped to Europe) were the main sources of soil fertilisation.

6 During the first month of aerial bombardment in October of 2001, the US military dropped 37,500 pounds of food in packages that each provided 2,200 calories per day. The total stockpile was approximately 2 million packages, enough to feed the entire city of Kabul for one day (CNN 2001).

the possibility of chemical warfare to the world. After the end of World War I, during which these weapons had been further developed and tested on Europe's counterposed armies, gas warfare became a distinct possibility in the British discourse on containing Soviet Bolshevism in Afghanistan. The Afghan ground, which was considered too stony for tank warfare, presented an opportunity to consider the effects of gas warfare, a military suggestion explicitly outlined in a letter from the governor-general of India, Lord Irwin, to Lord Birkenhead, then Secretary of State in India (Irwin 1926).

As an aid to organic manure, ammonium nitrate is introduced directly to the ground as a fertilising agent for soil and forage crops. Its derivative form, calcium ammonium nitrate, is popular because it delivers both nitrogen and calcium and has a neutral effect on the pH of soil; it neutralises acid, thus making it suitable for use on any soil. This is an important point of consideration for Afghan farmers given the adverse effects that salinity and water logging had already had in Afghanistan. Nitrogenous fertiliser quickly became the chief mode of fertilising soil in the country; it added necessary nutrients to crops and enhanced the limits of mechanised farming with chemical and scientific expertise. With this, tilling the land for crops became a matter not only of draft power but also of soil absorption rates, salinity levels, enhanced photosynthesis, and the delivery of macro- and micronutrients to crops.

Nitrogenous fertiliser would eventually enable explosive weapons and become a feature of contemporary counterinsurgency. But first it was disseminated across the Afghan countryside in the hope that it would sow political change and legitimise the Afghan state as the vanguard of socio-economic development. As we saw, the British imperial fixation with Afghan agriculture (and the quality of the soil) informed the accounts of naturalists and explorers and their recommendations to the East India Company. In the context of Afghan modernism, the ground became increasingly crucial to how Afghan reformers in the 1920s understood the project of cultural modernisation, especially after the importing of western media like telegraphy, telephony, cinema, and transportation technology (embodied in plans for a great Afghan railway). All of these would cement the authority of the Afghan state by enabling the generation of capital and new forms of propaganda and mobility.

It was this preoccupation with infrastructural development that influenced a larger pan-Islamist movement which entailed the promulgation of Persian as the official language of the nation and the railways as the quintessential technology of the modern. The ground became irrevocably identified with an intensification of modernisation and capitalist reproduction whilst governance became associated with Persian. It was a historical era that incited wonderment amongst Afghans and introduced a profound set of questions on the nature of modernity and selfhood – questions that invited new answers and new vocabularies, filling the discursive landscape with renewed optimism and cementing the notion of modern statecraft with developmen-

talism (Farhadi 1977: 169).⁷ Expressed through new technologies and words, this preoccupation turned the earthen ground into the site of cautious state-led agricultural development in later years and, once the use of synthetic fertilisers was widespread, into a minefield when ammonia nitrate became the chief ingredient for improvised explosive bombs.⁸ Thus, if historically mining served as a leverage and aid for agriculture, supplying it with instruments and metal, it was landmines that devastated both the ground and the possibility of agricultural production for decades to come. In Afghanistan, the twentieth-century union between agriculture and chemical warfare enabled both nitrogenous fertiliser and chemical weapons, turning agriculture into a medium for the dissemination of explosives and explosives into a metaphor for the failures of agriculture.

For the last forty years, beginning with the Soviet–Afghan War of 1979–1989, this perception has become inextricable from the idea that the Afghan countryside is a political danger to the Afghan state. As landmines have devastated agricultural production and Afghan bodies, they have also eroded the capacity of the state to control and integrate vast swathes of its territory.⁹ The Afghan ground is saturated with explosives. Already the scene of in-

7 For an analysis of the place of Mahmud Tarzī's writings in the context of the rise of pan-Islamism, global cosmopolitanism, and European colonialism, see Mojaddedi (2017). See also Farhadi, 1977.

8 It is important to note that this dissemination is parallel to the developmental aims of international agencies. For example, between 1973–1976 the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) led an extensive agricultural project to supply farmers with fertiliser by establishing the Afghan Fertilizer Company, thus assisting the Afghan government in its aims. In the contemporary moment, agricultural rehabilitation is aggrandised by USAID as key to economic growth and competitive exports. It comprises an alternative development strategy that is imagined as counterweight to a vast and parallel drug economy. Under the auspices of Chemonics, a private international development company, the 'Accelerating Sustainable Agriculture Program' was spearheaded across Afghanistan to improve agricultural yields, dissuade farmers from planting poppy, and enhance exports through the work and distribution of agricultural goods in twenty provincial and regional 'AgDepot' associations. This narrative of agricultural development as a source of competitive global exports and as countermeasure to a drug economy that accounts for up to 99% of the global supply of heroin was interrupted by the discourse of military crisis.

9 According to the United Nations Mine Action Center for Afghanistan (2015), 'Afghanistan acceded to the Ottawa Anti-personnel Mine Ban Treaty in September 2002, making a commitment to clear all emplaced Anti-personnel (AP) mines within ten years. The magnitude of the mine problem in Afghanistan, tied with the ongoing conflict, discovery on new hazardous areas, and under funding, however, has meant that the initial deadline of 2013 was untenable. In March 2012, the Government of Afghanistan submitted a request for a ten-year extension of the deadline to remove all AP mines by 2023.'

tense contestation, the ground was subject to landmine devastation and thus to further explosive violence that maims countless Afghans and devastates agricultural production. This in turn leads to the increased dissemination and use of synthetic fertilisers, which now comprise the chief ingredient of improvised explosive devices and have been crucial to sustaining the fight between the Afghan government and the Taliban forces until late 2021.

The empirical facts are astounding. An estimated twenty-million anti-personnel and anti-tank mines were laid during Soviet occupation. Additional mines were laid by Najibullah government troops during the civil war of the 1990s and again during the civil war between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance from 1994–2001. There are approximately 4,300 minefields and ‘hazardous areas’ with a total area of 569 square kilometres; and 82 separate firing ranges that belonged to troops from NATO and the International Security Assistance Force, covering a span of 951 square kilometres. At least 640,000 landmines have been laid since 1979, although the total tonnes of ordnances dropped in Afghanistan since October of 2001 is still classified, scattered in unknown numbers across the country by the US military and NATO forces, in both combat and war-simulation games.¹⁰

These large military grade mines and small improvised bombs are strewn across the landscape and readily activated, not by tanks or suicide bombers but by the force of a footstep. A total area of 1,486 square kilometres, almost twenty-five times the size of Manhattan, is explosive ground that threatens farmers and civilians in 1,900 communities across the country (United Nations Mine Action Center 2015; ISAF Public Affairs Office 2008; Brown 2012). Wherever they exist, landmines and improvised explosives are strewn indiscriminately with no sites of density or logic of distribution. Some detonate later by victims who unknowingly step on pressure-plate improvised devices.¹¹ By 2011, calcium ammonium nitrate became the main ingredient of improvised explosive devices, accounting for a surge in civilian and US/NATO deaths. Almost twice as explosive as TNT, fertiliser was used by Afghan insurgents to make these devices and accounted for a stunning 95% of all improvised bombs (Associated Press 2010a).

If agricultural production is a signifier of rural development, envisioned as potential in and above ground in heightened crop yields, then ammonium nitrate is its powerful agent of destruction, a pharmakon in every sense of the

10 In addition to this there are thousands of explosive items (heavy and light weapons), small arms rounds, ammunition stocks, and hidden weapons caches across the country.

11 A pressure-plate improvised explosive device is one of the most common improvised explosive devices used by the Taliban and other resistance factions. Unlike a remote-controlled improvised explosive devices, it is set off by the intended victim (usually a civilian) when they activate the bomb by stepping on a hidden pressure plate or pressure release switch or by tripping over a wire.

word. It structures Afghan rural life first as site of lack and then as a scene of excess, when the material outcome of landmine devastation becomes part of a vicious cycle of violence in which land, chemicals, and intentions alternate, depending on military and political strategy. After the Afghan Civil War, in the mid-1990s, when the Taliban consolidated their rule in major Afghan cities, places like Helmand became the focus of transnational pipeline ambitions as the global landmine problem reached catastrophic proportions, resulting in the call by the US government for a 'ban on its manufacture akin to the ban on chemical warfare' (Anderson et al. 1995: 718). In 2010 the US government claimed that the Afghan insurgency was relying on synthetic fertiliser (smuggled from neighbouring Pakistan) to make improvised explosive devices and suicide bomber vests (synthetic fertiliser is highly combustible, and readily used as such). In response, the Afghan government banned calcium ammonium nitrate and other nitrogenous fertilisers. This led to widespread condemnation from farmers who feared that their livelihoods and crops would fall into ruination (Cullison and Trofimov 2010; see also Associated Press 2010b; Filkins 2009). But more tellingly, a large number of Afghans report that their daily activities were affected by landmines, especially those pertaining to farming, and nomads and farmers suffer from the loss of animals every year.

The body

Military grade landmines have never been produced in Afghanistan, but they have come to symbolise the dissemination of violence. Landmines can be found not only in agricultural fields but in water canals, grazing lands, along dams and power lines, in defecation fields, and along roads (Fraser 2003), thus affecting both the transport of goods and the safety of stock and human lives. They are also found in previously demined lands when rainwater transports them from not yet cleared areas. Between 1991 and 2000 alone they accounted for over 400,000 deaths and diminished agricultural production by 200%. There are numerous types of landmines, with at least fifty-two designed to attack anyone within thirty meters, including the Soviet produced PFM-1 (air dropped 'butterfly' mines) widely used and attractive to children who mistake them for toys. Other anti-personnel mines are activated by tripwire or pressure plate, exploding into hundreds of metal fragments when detonated by a footstep. Victims not only require prosthetic limbs, but child victims often need to endure the traumatic horror of additional amputations when ongoing bone growth pierces through the original prosthetic (Fraser 2003: 78).

If, as Michel de Certeau (1988) claims, the ability to read a city as a text or representation is the conceit of a vertical perspective immune to the singularity of the everyday, cities like Kabul entail a deadly procession of practices

in which bodies are inseparable from the space of traversal and subject to its disruption from below. Every ‘chorus of idle footsteps’, de Certeau writes, leaves behind a palimpsest of traces. But in Kabul, tenuous pathways intersect in dense places rather than along diverse topoi; they are more likely to appear like a tightly buttoned series in central neighbourhoods where quilting points double as places deemed safe to traverse. At other times footsteps encounter interdiction and come to a standstill, arriving at impasses and militarised zones, or the sudden constraint of the Afghan National Police’s ‘Ring of Steel’, and the inaccessible secret spaces that make improvisatory movement impossible or the site of horror.

To lose oneself whilst walking, or even to become part of an urban text, is to risk becoming a double amputee, the fate of thousands of Afghans who will never stand on the ground again without the aid of prosthetics. The rise of this form of corporeal and social violence is the dramatic consequence of agricultural rehabilitation, and the elements which are part of that aim. But it is fundamentally also a matter of bodily violence and about the place of bodily severance in modern history and is part of modernity’s understanding of the earthen terrain. To return to the double meaning of the word *mine*, the practice of mining heavily mined ground entails both the loss of life and the literal trace of a history of violence – a violence that owes to the natural and political forces that have combined in Afghanistan to saturate its ground with clay and gravel (which extend the life of an explosive mine) but also with minerals and metal and explosives.

To consider this is to take seriously the topography of a form of violence inseparable from the surface of the ground. It is that surface, rather than the underground, which in Afghanistan became the site of a double displacement: the loss of limbs and the loss of productive ground. And thus, what emerges from a colonial and modern history of the ground as a site of economic interest and military intervention is a restructuring of the experience of everyday life as life readily interrupted by explosive violence and by the spectre of groundlessness.

On a corporeal plane, this requires a relationship not only between maimed bodies and the prosthetic discourse of rehabilitation, but also between bodies and the governing fiction of mobility and movement. Freedom of movement was the promise first made by the former Afghan state, and now the Taliban regime, to millions of Afghan refugees who returned to cities like Kabul and were incorporated into the dragnet of the war economy. This was particularly palpable from 2012–2014 when the availability of Afghan front-line workers (mainly translators, chaperones, drivers, security guards) in military bases, private defence compounds, and government buildings resulted in them being injured and a resurgence of what I call “prosthetic bodies.”

This returns us to the body as a crucial element and object of this logic. The sixteenth-century word and concept *prosthesis* comes from the Greek *pros-*, ‘in addition’, and *-tithenai*, ‘to put or place’. The origin of the word is a gesture of emplacement, a literal ‘setting something down’ that presumes a ground and the possibility of an extension – one that makes in the modern era ‘prosthetic God’ of persons, as Sigmund Freud (1930) describes in *Civilization and its Discontents*. The word carries within itself a reciprocity: a ground supplemented by something that is set upon it, and an extension that requires a place to be put. In this sense, supplementary extensions signal, in all their practical and techno-mediatic diversity, a fundamental lack and rupture, and challenge the idea that something is already whole or self-same.¹²

In a similar vein, Marshall McLuhan’s analysis of media extends this idea to argue that ‘any extension, whether of skin, hand, or foot, affects the whole psychic and social complex’ (McLuhan 1964: 19). Understood in this sense, the idea of a prosthetic as both an enabling and troubling extension can help us understand the relationship between political goals achieved through military violence and the extensions required to achieve them. Again, this requires us to extend our notion of a prosthetic addition to think about prosthetic bodies and subjectivities which are attached to military goals and bear the brunt of its violence in intense and irrevocable ways. At the same time, a prosthetic enhancement in the more limited sense is also a process of amputation, and, as we saw above, can take the literal form of multiple amputations when the body’s organic growth functions penetrate the fantasy of an assemblage.¹³

The form that a prosthetic limb takes is obviously indissociable from the cause of amputation. In the US, the most common cause of amputation is vascular disease, but in Afghanistan (as in Cambodia and Iran) 85% of amputations are the direct result of landmines, accounting for 300,000 amputees worldwide (Strait 2006: 3). To not have a limb is to be familiar with a series of painful sequences: a bone socket becomes the divide between body and mechanism, the pylon (the actual extension that replaces the length of

12 To understand the supplement as a philosophical problem that is part of the legacy of the privileging of writing over speech see Derrida, 1997; Johnson, 1995.

13 The idea of an assemblage is developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) in *A Thousand Plateaus* and emphasises the role and vital power of fluidity, exchange, and inter-connectivity in social formations. For example, the body, which we might conventionally think of as self-contained or coherent, becomes knowable, in part, through the assemblages it forms with other bodies, ‘either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 257). For a discussion of the translation of *agencement* into assemblage, and the former’s more open connotation of a mixture of bodies also meaning a ‘common notion’ and a state of becoming, see Phillips (2006).

the missing leg) mediates between the ground and literal groundlessness, and the end point (or artificial foot) becomes a medium for mobility and difference, accounting for prosthetic improvisations that are ‘culturally’ appropriate.

Erin Strait (2006) illustrates the importance of a wide range of prosthetics. These include hand-held poles with a simple padding at the knee (which exerts pressure and causes muscle contracture and even more rigidity in the joints); rubber tires opened up and wrapped around knee stumps (often ‘bilaterally’); PVC plastic pipes; bicycle seats; the Trans-Tibial Plastic Modular Component (with a ‘modern endoskeletal design in which accurate alignment and adjustment are possible’); high-density polyethylene water pipes; and the rubberised ‘Jaipur foot’ (of spongy rubber and purported to mimic the experience of walking barefoot, meant to hold up to the challenges of rural life) (Strait 2006). This array, which excludes the more sophisticated digitally designed prosthetics available in the West, reflects not only the breadth of devastation that amputation entails but also the radical incapacity of any one prosthetic to remedy those losses.

Between body and ground, and between weapon and body, the prosthetic limb becomes a point of difference where both lack and excess recur through a series of awful repetitions that defy the preservation of any single limb, making the prosthetic, like chemical supplements introduced to the ground, both poison and remedy. And whilst it helps, in literal form and metaphor, to think about other ironies that emerge in the discourse of mobility – for example, the limits on movement within militarised zones, or the influx of an unprecedented number of persons to Kabul and major cities – the prerogative of mobility, ‘embodied’ in the reach of the prosthetic limb, fundamentally illustrates how the body becomes an intermediary between the dispersion of violence on the ground and the quotidian world of social, political, and military violence above ground.¹⁴

But a prosthetic is also an encounter with difference and the desire to destructively hold space. And if it is true, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, that war marks an exterior place of articulation and flow – of knowledge, tools, and customary paths drawn out of smooth and traversable spaces – the

14 Since 2001, Kabul has become the world’s fourth fastest-growing city, a growth rate sustained by the return of repatriated refugees from Iran and Pakistan and an influx of people fleeing the effects of military violence in the southern and eastern provinces. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that since 2002 more than 5.8 million Afghan refugees have returned, with 4.7 million of them dependent on UNHCR aid. Afghan returnees are not only a key population for international aid agencies but also a constitutive component of the Afghan state’s discourse on its own institutional and economic capacities. After coming to power in August 2021, the Taliban immediately commenced a programme of resettling internally displaced Afghans by providing transportation and cash aid and televising these efforts to shore up political legitimacy.

improvised explosive device is how that space is destructively held between fighting parties. Like the logic of translation – both an encounter with difference and the uncontrollable space of representations, some of which are deadly (Mojaddedi 2019) – holding ground in war is a matter of how territory is sabotaged in the alternation of territorial control crucial to both conventional and guerrilla warfare. Thus, as the civil war between the Afghan state and Taliban forces continued until 2021, new territories were repeatedly subjected to the dissemination of landmines as control shifted rapidly between the two sides.

At the same time, the proliferation of landmines and improvised explosive devices and the procedures for making them are directly related to the multiplication of security and insurgent forces across the country as armed groups were buttressed by the Afghan National Army to help fight the Taliban – a group that is also divided into competing factions, including the Pakistani Taliban and IS Khorasan. Moreover, the Afghan government and NATO forces have a history of recruiting armed militias. This strategy has scattered weapons and bomb-making techniques across the country, techniques as readily available forms of knowledge that are cited by US military officials as flexible and weapons that are relatively impervious to modern technologies of detection.

Anxiety over territorial control is also one of adaptive borrowing. In Kabul these dramatic shifts were the subject of public anxiety and media discourse used to justify, in recent years, the intelligence gathering practices of the National Directorate of Security which wanted to secure Kabul from its surrounding provinces. We know from other contexts that to be armed during a counterinsurgency is to risk immediate capture or death. Alan Feldman describes this stark reality as ‘getting done’, a mode of social violence in which holding a weapon is the ‘fate of embodiment [of] (life) [...] detached from the self and transferred to the instrument of violence [...] the conduit of reversible violence is to conceptualise the body and the weapon as heterogeneous sites of mediation and exchange’ (Feldman 1991: 102). But the landmine is an inversion of this, a weapon that detaches life and full embodiment from the body and becomes part of reversible violence of prosthetic extension, both as the power ‘embodied’ in the weapon itself, in the form of nitrogenous fertiliser, and as the solution sought to the embodied violence it exacts.

Conclusion

This chapter shows that military and corporeal violence are inseparable from the earthen terrain and the discourse on its productivity. The aims of various empires and Afghan governments have often taken the form of direct intervention in and on the ground, interventions which range from botanical to mineral, railway to agricultural and which, in the case of agricultural de-

velopment, caused a resurgence of physical violence and crisis. This has resulted in a bodily catastrophe which is horrible and avoidable but seemingly everywhere. It is part of a much longer political history which turned the terrain into a repeated site of intervention and military assault and eventually a scene of contamination and latent explosive power.

This 'prosthetic crisis', exemplified by thousands of Afghans who are amputees or use prosthetic legs, has a double significance: it reveals the body as a site of violence and loss first through the force of an explosive event and then through repeated amputation and prosthetic fitting. It exemplifies the place of the contaminated ground in disseminating physical violence in uncontrollable ways. As a site of destruction, the ground is an unavoidable source of physical violence. But I have illustrated that it is not just the devastation of bodies, which occurs not once but through a series of traumatic repetitions, but also the way in which that violence materialises a deep irony and the general logic of the supplement. Thus, alongside the rise of new visual networks and technologies of control, which privilege the idea of capture (that is, the body of the insurgent), contemporary practices of counterinsurgency volatilise the ground that is fought over. As a result, the Afghan ground has become the extended scene of a form of violence difficult to account for, a violence characterised as much by its randomness as its all-encompassing nature.

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