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Limits of Knowledge and Power in Afghanistan

Shah Mahmoud Hanifi

dire poverty, rampant illness, and omni-present physical danger notwithstanding, Afghanistan appears like a black hole or a Bermuda Triangle that ingests global information but yields little to the world in return

How knowledge is accrued and applied are important considerations for students of history. Because Afghanistan figures relatively prominently in the current national electoral discourse it is appropriate to address some of the issues relating to knowledge and power in the country.

Afghanistan as a whole is largely unknown to Afghans inside and outside the territory itself. The country is also essentially opaque and mysterious to the swarm of international (primarily American) military-civilian conglomerates occupying about twenty well-defined enclaves in Afghanistan that contradictorily sustain an imported regime of expatriates in Kabul and support local warlords in the remainder of the country. For locals and foreigners alike there is a dearth of raw information about Afghanistan and, perhaps more importantly, viable frameworks for processing Afghan-centered data. At home and abroad, this perilous collusion of ignorance allows for unconscious mystification of Afghanistan on the one hand and political manipulation of Afghanistan on the other.

How to account for the paucity of knowledge about Afghanistan inside and outside the country? In terms of the domestic/national side of this unfortunate equation, we find a weak state that was decidedly inert and ambiguous by neither seriously attempting to cultivate a sense of shared super-ordinate national identity nor caring to preserve an array of ethnic, regional, and sectarian affiliations. Residents of Kabul are especially insulated from affairs outside the city and a key index of the Kabul-centered Afghan state's failure to generate senses of patriotism and citizenship is the pandemic historical illiteracy -- regarding inter-group and state-society relations in particular -- that characterizes the population of the capital city and the country-at-large. All communities of Afghans need to become privy to their own and each other's cultural heritage and historical realities before a shared sense of nation can take root.

We can use scholarly production to evaluate the international community's knowledge of Afghanistan. In the cases of Western European and American scholarship (which I should add are quite distinct from Russian and Soviet scholarship) two characteristics stand out. The first is that English-language writings about Afghanistan often result from exceedingly limited time in the country and a scarce few authors engage even one of roughly a dozen local languages, and if so usually weakly. The country scholarship is also notably un-integrated: few country-specific writings reference other such writings in a serious way so as to form a discussion or debate, and there is a prominent cognitive gap

separating local micro- from country-wide macro-specialists on Afghanistan.

Colonialism highlights and problematizes the relationship between knowledge and power. Looking at the American colonial discourse on Afghanistan it is difficult to reconcile President George W. Bush's ongoing claims of 'victories for democracy and freedom' in Afghanistan with pronouncements from the commanding U.S. military official in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General David Barno, about the 'successful implementation' in early 2004 of a new ground-level strategy of varyingly sized military units exerting "ownership" over local territories and resources under the guise of "development and reconstruction" that once unveiled reveals the overriding motive of capturing/killing Osama bin Laden, Mullah Omar and few other individuals. So the nation-wide rhetoric in America contains the claim of liberation that is confounded by the reality of military occupation and purported possession in a contradiction that typifies colonial discursive formations. The intellectual tragedy of it all is that a handful of American academics, who traditionally relied on Afghan government translators, taxi drivers and servants in Kabul (with limited experience or exposure elsewhere in the country) to create anecdotal and unsustainable caricatures of Afghan society, are now uncritically reinforcing their already ill-founded categories, attitudes and understandings while helping to drive and direct the American colonial venture in the country.

Historically, the Afghan state has been dependent on external resources for survival, various peripheries have regularly and systemically destabilized it, and its cultural productivity has been minimal. So reinforcing an endemically tenuous political structure only highlights the shallow pools of rule where state authorities waded through increasingly perilous interactions with patrons, adversaries, dependants, and each other until they are replaced and the cycle is repeated. Ignorance should not be coronated, and without an informed, healthy, and economically viable populace the hastily contrived and already delayed and truncated October Presidential elections in Afghanistan are woefully premature.

With Afghanistan we are confronted with discernible structural and practical limits as to what can be known. Power is about control, and what is not known cannot be controlled. If knowledge is or leads to power, at present in Afghanistan occupiers and state-authorities alike remain fundamentally powerless and mired in fortified and alienating oases of shared ignorance in Kabul, a few other towns, various base camps and voting stations scattered about the country. For historians the basic lessons are that there are in fact ways to effectively learn almost anything but that one shouldn't ask too much of a limited database. How and how well Afghans and Americans know the United States are of course another set of perspectives on the holograph of global knowledge and power very much worth considering.

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