

ROUNDTABLE

## Writing Histories of Capital in the Shadow of War

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In November 2010, twenty-four heads of member states of NATO assembled for a summit in Lisbon. On their agenda was an overhaul of the alliance's decade-long security strategy. On the sidelines of this summit, the heads of government met with Afghan President Hamid Karzai and announced plans to withdraw all NATO troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. The decision was not wholly unexpected. However, in newsrooms and among select consulting firms that worked with Afghan ministries in the capital Kabul, the announcement ratcheted up a sense of unease. Doubts were cast over the Afghan national army's preparedness to carry out solo combat operations.

The following week, I found myself in a teahouse at Bazaar-e Sokhta, a small settlement built around a market in Dara-e Suf Bala district of Samangan province. In the evening, a group of lorry drivers huddled together in the center of the large hall and exchanged notes on the state of the road that passed through town, connecting Mazar-e Sharif to the coal mines of Dahan-e Tor and beyond. Zia Hossaini, an aspiring poet, read samples of his work to a willing audience in one corner. In the morning, Hossaini would take a shared taxi to Mazar-e Sharif, where he planned to work as a mason's apprentice. He hoped to move to Iran and secure construction work there eventually. Hossaini's audience was mostly from the adjoining area, bar two men who had arrived from Balkh and Kunduz that afternoon. They were on their way to seek employment at a coal mine, seventy kilometers south of the market town.

What merit might there be in overlaying an ostensibly routine encounter involving lorry drivers and economic migrants, who faced by drought, flash floods, or disputes over land set off in search of livelihoods, onto a retelling of high-level politics? To what extent can it pluralize our understanding of Afghan experiences of the "War on Terror"? Can this shift the frame of analysis from the physical violence wrought by the war to the less overt ways in which it has structured people's mobilities and fashioned new forms of economic behavior? On the surface, such an exercise can help address two historiographical conditions that bedevil histories of Afghanistan. First, it can trouble the assumption, found mainly in imperial histories but surprisingly durable in many contemporary accounts, that the history of Afghanistan resembles congeries of dramatic events, wars, and crises. Nivi Manchanda describes this condition as a function of the fluctuating interest in Afghan history. As interest in Afghan pasts wavers from the intense to the perfunctory, in keeping with the varying rhythms of external interference, so too, she suggests, emerge histories that seek to capture the region either in totalizing narratives or not at all.<sup>1</sup> The act of layering the political and

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<sup>1</sup> Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

the social can direct attention toward longer-term transformations that are frequently elided by histories focused on state-making and state failure.<sup>2</sup>

Second, and crucially for this essay, such a move can help dissolve the separation between village and city, province and Kabul that siloes much of the extant scholarship on Afghanistan. Even critiques of the two-decade-long US occupation are not immune to this condition.<sup>3</sup> Homogenizing Afghan experiences of the “War on Terror” into two broad categories: villages that bore the brunt of the US-led NATO war effort and cities that drew their sustenance from a burgeoning aid economy, these critiques obscure rather than explain. They reify rather than suture categories. My choice to place Dara-e Suf, Kabul, and even Lisbon in a conjoined frame at the beginning of this essay is a response to this intellectual fault line that is constitutive to knowledge production on Afghanistan. It is not a summative intervention as it does not urge that we read Dara-e Suf alongside Kabul. Instead, it seeks to reveal how these and other places link up on either side of the province-Kabul divide and across scales, encompassing geographies of a regional and, indeed, global order.

I build here on the revisionist work of historians and sociologists such as Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, Robert Nichols, James Caron, and Nivi Manchanda. But the questions I raise have to do with the effects of the “War on Terror” on marketization and the spatial reordering of rural Afghanistan. What would an alternative reading of the “War on Terror,” conceptualized as a history of capital from the ground up, look like? How has the war reconfigured relations between the provinces and Kabul? How might we write about this relation? I pose these questions in the context of developments seen over the last two decades in Dara-e Suf in Samangan. However, I do not doubt that similar inquiries could be made about many other places in Afghanistan. In Samangan province, I first encountered both the developmental vision of the post-2001 Afghan state and its international partners and the extent to which it drew upon the idea that Afghanistan was composed of discrete “village communities.” While tracking the National Solidarity Program (NSP), the most comprehensive village-centric development program under the republic, I met with elected council members in Samangan and elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> From Qarqin, hemmed in from the north by the Amu Darya, to Kajran, bordering the southern Helmand province, members attested that the program had revitalized community participation in the management of commons.<sup>5</sup> Some peppered their assessments with the odd lament about how international intervention had made people “money-minded.” For instance, near the main market of Dara-e Suf, an older man said that state and NGO incursion into the management of local infrastructures had made ‘*ashar*, a system based on the idea of reciprocal labor, irrelevant.<sup>6</sup> Money, he suggested, was now a mediating principle in community dealings.

I argue that what the older man in Dara-e Suf was alluding to was one among several outcomes of capital breaching rural Afghanistan. It was a change inherent to the logic of capital.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Nichols, “Afghan Histories beyond the State, War, and Tribe,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 1 (2013): 146–48.

<sup>3</sup> This condition is a corollary of what Shah Mahmoud Hanifi has described as the “Kabul-centrism” of Afghan historiography. See Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, “Quandaries of the Afghan Nation,” in Shahzad Bashir and Robert D. Crews, eds., *Under the Drones: Modern Lives in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 87.

<sup>4</sup> The National Solidarity Program aimed to increase rural participation in small-scale development work by constituting democratically elected councils at the village level. On how it transposed new forms of political authority onto existing systems of governance, see Alessandro Monsutti, “Fuzzy Sovereignty: Rural Reconstruction in Afghanistan, between Democracy Promotion and Power Games,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 3 (2012): 563–91.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Saltmarshe and Abhilash Medhi, *Local Governance in Afghanistan: A View from the Ground* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Under ‘*ashar*, members of a community could depend on their neighbors’ free labor, while promising to offer their labor in return at a later date. In practice, ‘*ashar* could look different from district to district. The ones soliciting labor typically asked for help harvesting crops or erecting boundary or retaining walls. They also provided a free lunch and tea to those offering labor.

Economic migration in and out of the district had already laid waste to the idea of boxed-in communities. Now, uneven marketization was pulling local places into a web of capitalist relations that stretched across Afghanistan and spilled beyond the country's physical boundaries. Village and city jostled for room in this new network. In Dara-e Suf, this spatial reordering manifested in the form of a complex logistical apparatus geared primarily toward the extraction and distribution of coal. Indeed, by the time of my visit, there were no timeless village communities in Dara-e Suf, just a motley collection of locals and people who had arrived in the area reacting to various political and economic developments. The migrant population comprised three main groups: economic migrants, like the two young men from Balkh and Kunduz I met at the teahouse who were drawn to the area by the opportunities on offer at the coal mines of Dahan-e Tor; internally displaced people who had moved there under duress when the Taliban first wrested control of neighboring areas in 1996; and returnees from Shiraz, Qom, Mashhad, and other Iranian cities who settled down in the valley after 2001.

In revealing the limits of the ubiquitous Afghan village community, Dara-e Suf constituted a contradiction in terms. It held up examples of communities in flux. It laid bare the flaws of a sociological imagination willed into existence by an older historiography and reinforced in recent years by village-centric development paradigms. Additionally, it posed questions about the political economy of what appeared at first to fit Anna Tsing's classic definition of a resource frontier. After all, what were the four-hundred-plus coal mines that dotted the valley around Dahan-e Tor if not parts of a landscape "turn[ed] . . . into . . . resources available for the industries of the world"?<sup>7</sup> And yet, in many respects, the area formed ground zero of a late-capitalist enterprise, where migrants converged, coercive labor practices were shaped, and the logistics of extracting and distributing on the cheap were worked out.

What complicates this story is that the structural transformations discussed above were not just by-products of the "War on Terror." The conditions of possibility of such a history long predated that war. Let me outline the bearings of this longer history in a slightly more concrete fashion. In 1955, the government of Afghanistan established the Afghanistan Geological Survey Directorate to preside over geological reconnaissance missions in the country. Soon after, the Afghan state flew in geologists from France, Germany, and Italy to lead explorations for mineral occurrences. The mapping of Afghanistan's natural resources gained momentum. When the first coal mines in Dara-e Suf opened in 1966, the Karkar and Ispushta mines in nearby Baghlan province had already been in operation for over a decade. But the mines in Dara-e Suf swiftly displaced them on the strength of their higher-quality yield. Initial estimates pegged the area's high-quality coal reserves at 60 million tons. Some of it was even suitable for coking. In the 1970s, these mines mainly supplied coal to the thermal power plants in and around Mazar-e Sharif. Production rose steadily throughout this decade and plummeted dramatically in 1979 as a political crisis engulfed Afghanistan. In the aftermath of the Saur Revolution, local Hazaras, unaffiliated with any political party, protested against the Khalq and Parcham factions of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup>

The next chapter in this serialized account of coal mining in Dara-e Suf commenced in 1996. By September that year, the Taliban had emerged as the de facto political rulers of Afghanistan. For the next five years, the Dahan-e Tor area of Dara-e Suf remained among a handful of autonomous enclaves around the country. In 1999, Taliban insurgents used incendiary clusters to bomb Dara-e Suf's main market. In the weeks that followed, armed

<sup>7</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, "Natural Resources and Capitalist Frontiers," *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 48 (29 November–5 December 2003): 5100.

<sup>8</sup> Rolf Bindemann, "The Political Reconstruction of Afghanistan: The Hazaras a Hundred Years after Abdur Rahman," in Micheline Centlivre-Demont, ed., *Afghanistan: Identity, Society and Politics since 1980* (London: I. B. Tauris), 44.

militias and the narrow rock corridor of Tang-e Hassani combined to arrest the march of Taliban soldiers some kilometers north of the valley. Around the same time, internally displaced people from northern Bamiyan and districts to the south of Mazar-e Sharif poured into the area. The organized mining of coal came to a grinding halt during this period. But locals continued to do opencast mining to fulfill domestic demands.

In 2001, the “War on Terror” claimed as its first casualty the Taliban government of Afghanistan. Then came the market economy, giving the country its first taste of post-Cold War capitalism. Yet this was no straightforward transition. If, in places around Latin America, neoliberal reforms and a simultaneous hollowing out of the state extended capitalist relations among many indigenous populations, in Afghanistan capital rode on the coat-tails of the “War on Terror” at the same time as a nascent state emerged on the scene with a narrow remit and limited legitimacy. Whereas in post-colonies dispossession and displacement are posited primarily as functions of colonial violence, in Afghanistan successive waves of violence with local and global roots had dispossessed and displaced masses.

In and around the coal mines of Dahan-e Tor, this last set of developments had elaborate ramifications. Comparing land deeds that had survived from half a century before, the new Afghan government placed some mines under the control of individual landowners. It retained control of mines located on public lands. There too, shortages in capacity led the government to lease extraction to private contractors. The infrastructure of distribution that emerged around the mines also was private. At Tor’s solitary weighbridge, miners piled freshly dug out coal onto large trucks. Owners and contractors claimed compensation, giving distributors free rein to carry these loads to destinations of their choice, often retail and wholesale markets in the provincial capital Aybak, Mazar-e Sharif, and Kabul. The state, which had asserted few to no regulations up to this point, almost magically manifested its presence in Dara-e Suf’s main market, but only to collect toll. Occasionally, in places where the government’s writ wore thin, armed insurgents kidnapped truck drivers for ransom. In areas in which the government outright ceded control to insurgents, the latter collected toll, inflating the price of coal further down the supply chain.

Coupled with the state’s propensity to disappear periodically, the organic separation between extraction and distribution locked into place a supply chain that thrived on keeping wages down and labor and environmental standards as undemanding as possible.<sup>9</sup> Overworked donkeys rarely lived for more than two years, and the hillsides were shorn of all traces of brushwood. Miners were among the worst affected. Most miners dug down to 300 meters with just shovels and pickaxes procured from the local market at personal expense. Less than half of the mine owners provided wooden columns to prevent the insides of shafts from caving in. Intense heat, gas leakage, and the risk of collapsing roofs posed a constant danger to life and limb. Still, migrants and locals used mining to complement their income from small-scale farming. Powerless to resist the circumstances surrounding their displacement, many dreamt that working in these coal mines would be a transit stop en route to less precarious work in Iran.

So how do we write this alternative history? In addition to focusing on the extractive regimes imposed by the larger context of the “War on Terror” and the near-abdication of the state in certain places, how might we look for traces of capitalist exchange in the interstices between proprietor, wholesaler and small trader, migrant, and returnee? How can we attend to Dara-e Suf’s position relative to emerging territorial enclaves, both proximate and distant? I anticipate that such a history could follow one of at least three narrative arcs. It could take the form of a straightforward labor history that emphasizes the working lives of miners and the circulation of economic migrants to and from the wider region and Iran. In

<sup>9</sup> On the exploitation that is integral to extractive operations in general and supply chains in particular, see Anna Tsing, “Supply Chains and the Human Condition,” *Rethinking Marxism* 21, no. 2 (2009): 148–76; and Verónica Gago and Sandro Mezzadra, “A Critique of the Extractive Operations of Capital: Toward an Expanded Concept of Extractivism,” *Rethinking Marxism* 29, no. 4 (2017): 574–91.

examining the politics of place, such a history also could explore the social lives of peasants caught between reform, counterreform, and the fluctuating fortunes of the local mining industry. Taking the logistics of extraction and distribution of coal as its entry point, such a history could compare historical and current forms of accumulation based on the exploitation of fossil fuels and human and nonhuman labor. It could then branch out to consider the destruction and production of road infrastructure and the attendant reconfiguration of spatial categories. Finally, such a history could posit Dara-e Suf, and specifically Dahan-e Tor, as a slippery edge between life and death worlds where the relative expendability of both humans and nonhumans mediates their incorporation into a wider capitalist economy. As possibly the most imaginative history outlined here, it also could engage with the affective relationships of longing and belonging that tie people to their place of habitation and even draw returnees from Iran.

Aspiring to write such histories would only be a small attempt toward dismantling the stodgy grip that successive wars, including the “War on Terror,” have come to claim in our imagination of Afghanistan. Turning our attention to new actors and networks might allow historians to move beyond the abstractions and simplifications that have distilled vast multitudes of Afghan experiences into a set of easily accessible symbols: the gun-wielding peasant, brutal warlord, cerulean burqa, and militant madrasa student. Centering a discussion of capitalist transformation in rural Afghanistan could, at the very least, arm us with the conceptual vocabulary to write about the country’s provinces as something other than a periphery, and by extension, Kabul as something different than a core. Who knows? Acknowledging the seemingly minor valences of the “War on Terror” now, when the US occupation of Afghanistan has formally ended, might cast a somewhat different light on the war itself.