

# 1 The Construction of Afghanistan as a 'Discursive Regime'

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[I]t is the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency: ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalisation; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability, which, for the stereotype, must always be in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed.

—Homi Bhabha, 1983<sup>1</sup>

Left to their own devices, Afghans engage in internecine battles, or simply enjoy freedom – not the kind enforceable by a Magna Carta, Bill of Rights, or Communist Manifesto, but of more ancient derivation – unbothered by government at all.

—Stephen Tanner, 2003<sup>2</sup>

The imbrication of knowledge with power is nowhere more obvious than in the realm of learning and pedagogy in the human sciences. The sustained study of distant places and peoples, in a particular manner, has been crucial to the success of colonial ventures, with 'scholar-practitioners' often at the helm of these endeavours.<sup>3</sup> The recurrent calls for 'embedded knowledge' and the deployment of anthropology and other social sciences at the service of 'empire lite' are the products of a long and intimate relationship between the military

<sup>1</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism', *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War against the Taliban* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Traditionally the French have been at the forefront of this, with Napoleon Bonaparte's scientific expedition to Egypt as the first exercise of its kind. The dispatch of an enormous contingent of academics and scientists (savants) to Egypt in the late eighteenth century and the subsequent founding of the Institut d'Égypte (Egyptian Scientific Institute) paved the way for 'Egyptology' and then for contemporary 'Middle East studies' (or 'Orientalism'). In the twentieth century there was a burgeoning of institutions in Europe for the specialised production of knowledge of the colonies. The founding mission of the School of Oriental Studies (the 'African' was added to its name in 1938) in London was to rival the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales in Paris and the famous Oriental schools of Berlin and Petrograd.

and the academy or, more euphemistically, between Mars and Minerva.<sup>4</sup> The colonial episteme was revived most recently in the shape of the US Department of Defense's Human Terrain System (HTS), a programme which 'manufactures a highly reified version of Afghan society and makes claims of authenticity, often framed within a discourse of "tribe" as an unchanging dimension of Afghan society'.<sup>5</sup>

In the pages below, I analyse some of the stock tropes that have been deployed, indeed parroted, in contemporary work on Afghanistan that feeds directly into this resuscitated colonial episteme. After focusing on the construction of Afghanistan alternately as the 'graveyard of empires', as a 'buffer' in the 'Great Game' and as a space of disease and pathology in a number of important texts that are the core of the US military's 'cultural awareness strategy', I spend some time analysing one particular book, *Afghanistan 101*, by Ehsan Entezar, which crystallises the concerns of this chapter, and of the book as a whole, in the ways in which it (re)presents Afghanistan as a space of alterity, pathology and even monstrosity.<sup>6</sup> This text is exemplary in its propagation of a certain 'idea' of Afghanistan, an idea that is increasingly becoming 'common sense', not least because it is underwritten by an entire infrastructure of knowledge-producing entities. Read collectively, these texts and tropes also signal the deep-seated anxiety that produce what Bhabha has called the 'narcissistic demand for colonial authority': the desire to make sense of that which is the *same but not quite* through reductionist strategies of articulation such as stereotyping, euphemisms and caricatures.<sup>7</sup> In the context of an intervention in which the need for shorthand essentialisms is especially acute, given the lineage of intermittent imperial engagement with Afghanistan – heightened during times of crisis – these tropes both reflect and engender a set of power relations in which Afghanistan is repetitively constituted as a place of mystery and of inscrutable otherness.

This chapter takes as its point of departure Duncan Bell's claim that '[t]he social sciences stand at the nexus of power and knowledge in the modern

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) and Josef Ansorge and Tarak Barkawi, 'Utile Forms: Power and Knowledge in Small War', *Review of International Studies* 40, no. 1 (2014), 3–24.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Hopkins and Magnus Marsden, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier* (London: Hurst & Co., 2011), 7. While formally this programme was repealed in 2014, there are now rumours, including some emanating from the US Army, of its being revamped into something bigger called the Global Cultural Network, based at Fort Leavenworth. See [www.congress.gov/113/plaws/publ291/PLAW-113publ291.pdf](http://www.congress.gov/113/plaws/publ291/PLAW-113publ291.pdf) and <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2016/03/09/army-misled-congress-and-public-program/81531280/> (both last accessed 13 March 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Ehsan M. Entezar, *Afghanistan 101: Understanding Afghan Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man', 128.

world. Universities and other research institutions have generated, incubated and helped to disseminate forms of knowledge, and programmes for social and political action that have played a fundamental role in shaping the world in which we live.<sup>8</sup> By undertaking a close reading of texts that are at the core of the US military's 'cultural awareness' strategy, my objective is to enumerate the ways in which these accounts perpetuate a particular, reified understanding of the Afghan nation and people. Often written with the explicit (well-intentioned) aim of making Afghanistan easier to comprehend for the Western outsider, this body of work leads to a rather simplistic and ultimately misleading caricature of an enormously complex part of the world.<sup>9</sup> It is precisely in this (re)iterative power of discourse, in its capacity to produce the phenomena that it merely claims to be relaying, that the crucial importance of studying texts, tropes and narratives such as these lies.

The texts and tropes examined below can be broadly nested under the category of 'mercenary' anthropology, understood as the increasing militarisation of anthropology since 2001 and the turn to notions such as 'culture' and 'society' in the formulation of military and counter-insurgency doctrine.<sup>10</sup> While it may be argued that work in this vein can make for soft targets of critique, there are two main reasons why a focus on policy-oriented scholarship that carries the patina of 'cultural empathy' is nonetheless important: (i) 'thin' anthropology, geared towards training outside actors in the guise of soldiers, aid workers and those employed by the NGO or not-for-profit and charity sectors is the most widely read and circulated literature and therefore continues to inform policy in and towards the region;<sup>11</sup> and (ii) much of the critique of this style of work remains tied to and based heavily upon the same logics, if more sophisticated in its analysis. That is, even where there is an acknowledgement that the 'Afghan' subject should be 'heard from', the role they are allowed to play is pre-assigned, with the speaking part written beforehand.

<sup>8</sup> Duncan Bell, 'Writing the World: Disciplinary History and Beyond', *International Affairs* 85, no. 1 (2003), 3.

<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that Afghanistan is any more or less complex than any other part of the world; to do so would directly undermine the purpose of this exercise. My intention is merely to argue that platitudes about Afghan tribal codes, mindsets and ideologies stem from a body of knowledge that is explicitly geared towards 'making sense' of the Afghans by making some stock assumptions about them and that in the final analysis, a dangerous practice even when it acknowledges the 'complexity' of Afghan culture.

<sup>10</sup> I borrow this term from Roberto Gonzalez, 'Towards Mercenary Anthropology? The New US Army Counterinsurgency Manual *FM 3-24* and the Military-Anthropology Complex', *Anthropology Today* 23, no. 3 (2007), 14–19.

<sup>11</sup> 'Thin' here is meant to signify the opposite of Geertz's notion of 'thickness' mentioned in the Introduction to this book.

A case in point would be Thomas Barfield's *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, which is a well-researched historical account that figures prominently in university syllabi and has been touted as 'essential reading' for those interested in the region.<sup>12</sup> However, in the very first page of the book Barfield decodes Afghanistan as a problematic political entity by arguing that the country 'became a failed state' in the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> The book foregrounds the 'tribal nature' of Afghan politics and reinstates the importance of understanding this tribal make-up of the country in order to get a handle on its politics and history. While he is more measured in his statements than Ehsan Entezar (analysed at some length below), the frame of reference, or the 'grid of intelligibility',<sup>14</sup> remains the same, and a thoroughly racialised logic permeates the vocabulary and reasoning used to apprehend Afghan political universe(s) and lifeways. Hence Barfield can write of the power struggle that resulted in the 1980s after the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was dissolved: '[i]t was not the result of some Afghan penchant for blood feud or tribal rivalries (although these did play a part) but rather the predictable consequence of having armed and funded political-military factions in Pakistan that had long awaited for such an opportunity to arise'.<sup>15</sup> On his account, then, some inexplicable 'Afghan penchant for blood feuds and tribal rivalries' had a small but important role to play in the political upheaval that resulted from the power vacuum created by the dissolution of the ruling party in Afghanistan.

This is not to argue for the irrelevance of feuds and rivalries per se but to demonstrate how widespread the perception of Afghans as innately driven by barbaric ancient traditions is. The point here is not to debate the accuracy of representations nor the 'authenticity' of certain forms of social organisation

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Neumann, US ambassador to Afghanistan in 2005–7, maintains that the book is of 'extraordinary importance'. His and other endorsements can be read at <http://press.princeton.edu/quotes/q9144.html> (last accessed 1 February 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 1. The full paragraph reads: '[i]t remained peacefully neutral in the first and second world wars, although it experienced a brief civil war in 1929. But then in the mid twentieth century Afghanistan was transformed into a cockpit for the cold war struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union that reached its climax with the Soviet invasion in 1979 and its withdrawal ten years later. In the subsequent civil war that erupted in the 1990s, Afghanistan became a failed state, ignored by the world. At the beginning of the twenty-first century it burst back on to the world scene when radical Muslim jihadists planned the 9/11 attack against the United States from there and provoked a U.S. invasion in retaliation. Since that time, a new Afghan government has struggled to bring stability to the country in the face of an Islamist insurgency.'

<sup>14</sup> Ann Laura Stoler has argued that grids of intelligibility were always fashioned from 'uncertain knowledge' reflecting colonial anxieties and incertitude and inherently 'socially contingent' in 'Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance', *Archival Science* 2, nos 1–2 (2002), 87–109. This is a slightly different reading of Michel Foucault's 'grid of intelligibility' as it appears in *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 93.

<sup>15</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 250.

present in Afghanistan – for that leads to a whole other set of questions of experience, authority and interpretation – but to show how the production of knowledge about Afghanistan remains intimately tied to imperial forms of power. In the current imaginary, ‘they’ are always already inherently irrational, guided by unfathomable motives (even when we are told that these are only part of the picture). Barfield tellingly also ends his book by resorting to a familiar metaphor of disease when referring to the Taliban insurgency currently under way in Afghanistan. Thus Barfield, an otherwise acute observer of Afghan politics and evidently well versed in the historical landscape of the country, nevertheless remains embedded to these same logics of distancing and disavowal and fiercely loyal to the very ontological assumptions that define his less nuanced counterparts. Before we direct our attention to one such scholar, the following discussion reviews three of the stock tropes used in the broader discourse on Afghanistan.

### Graveyard of Empires

The euphemistic reference to Afghanistan as the ‘graveyard of empires’ has found a place in most contemporary work on the country. This section conducts an epistemic enquiry into the political valence of this trope, arguing that it is especially ill chosen on three counts. Firstly, it is ahistorical, relying on a selective evocation of history. Related to this ahistoricism, it sets up the past as the ‘key’ to understanding the Afghan present. A simplistic version of this argument is one that stresses the ‘unchanging’ nature of Afghanistan, harking back to the Anglo-Afghan wars of the nineteenth century as not merely shaping the political exigencies of Afghanistan today, but being preordained and definitive guides to the future. Secondly, it is geographically or ‘physically’ deterministic: Afghanistan is constructed as a land of unconquerable terrain, its topography menacing and ultimately unassailable. Not only does this present the physical environment as an immutable entity, but it also feeds into representations of Afghans as rugged warriors, bred to be weathered and austere. Thirdly, it is racialised: Afghans as inhabitants, creators and living relics of this graveyard are constructed as inured to hardship, belligerent and always prepared for combat. Seemingly corroborated with references to *Pashtunwali* as the stagnant ‘code of honour’ that instils a desire for revenge, and Wahhabi Islam, which glorifies martyrdom and death in battle, the construal of Afghanistan as ‘the graveyard of empires’ becomes a politically charged trope that others the Afghan populace.

In alluding to Afghanistan as the graveyard of empires, the three Anglo-Afghan wars (1839–42, 1878–80 and 1919 respectively) and the Soviet invasion of 1978 are adduced as the paradigmatic examples, with occasional reference to Alexander the Great and Chinggis Khan as also having met their

match in Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> An article published in *Foreign Affairs* in 2001 titled 'Afghanistan: The Graveyard of Empires' captures the thrust of much work that portrays Afghanistan as the land that has ostensibly, since time immemorial, been the place where foreign armies 'go to die'. Thus the author, Milton Bearden, writes of Khyber:

This spot, perhaps more than any other, has witnessed the traverse of the world's great armies on campaigns of conquest to and from South and Central Asia. All eventually ran into trouble in their encounters with the unruly Afghan tribals. Alexander the Great sent his supply trains through the Khyber, then skirted northward with his army to the Konar Valley on his campaign in 327 BC. There he ran into fierce resistance and, struck by an Afghan archer's arrow, barely made it to the Indus River with his life. Genghis Khan and the great Mughal emperors began passing through the Khyber a millennium later and ultimately established the greatest of empires – but only after reaching painful accommodations with the Afghans.<sup>17</sup>

While there is some ambiguity about the 'defeat' suffered by Alexander and Chinggis Khan in Afghanistan, most Western historiography is relatively consistent in its labelling of the British adventures in Afghanistan as a failure. For instance, Thomas Barfield, to give him credit where it is due, takes exception to the graveyard canard, claiming instead that Afghanistan has been a 'highway of conquest' since the beginning of recorded history and that only since the nineteenth century can the country be rightly thought of as the burial ground for imperial ambition. He contests that the territory that now comprises Afghanistan was 'easily conquered and ruled' by foreign invaders, and posits that the difficulties faced by invading armies including those of Alexander and Chinggis Khan were caused by attacks by rival states and not by rebellions carried out by inhabitants. Although his history of pre-modern Afghanistan is therefore 'revisionist' in this sense, he nevertheless ends up subscribing to the notion that modern Afghanistan is somehow particularly predisposed to be impervious to foreign rule. He asks: '[H]ow is it that a territory that was historically overrun by every major power in pre-modern times became so indigestible in the last 150 years?'<sup>18</sup> and begins his inquisition with the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1839–42.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Seth Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2010). See also Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia* (London: John Murray, 2006). Cf. Rob Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War: Culture and Pragmatism: A Critical History* (London: Hurst & Co., 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Milton Bearden, 'Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires', *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 6 (2001), [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/57411/milton-bearden/afghanistan-graveyard-of-empires](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/57411/milton-bearden/afghanistan-graveyard-of-empires) (last accessed 20 February 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Barfield, 'Problems in Establishing Legitimacy in Afghanistan', *Iranian Studies* 37, no. 2 (2004), 263.



Figure 1.1 Lady Butler, *Remnants of an Army*.  
The Print Collector/Hulton Archive via Getty Images

Indeed, this war is seemingly eternally inscribed in Anglophone institutional memory as the time when '[a] horde of "pagan savages" with primitive weapons had routed the world's greatest power'.<sup>19</sup> This memory has been pictorially enshrined and commemorated in a famous Victorian oil painting by Elizabeth Southerend Thompson – better known as Lady Butler – *The Remnants of an Army* (1879), which depicts an assistant surgeon in the Bengal Army, Dr William Brydon, clinging to the mane of a fatigued and dying horse and advancing solitarily towards Jalalabad fort.<sup>20</sup>

This melancholic and elegiac painting (Figure 1.1) is partly responsible for the myth that Brydon was the sole survivor of the 16,000 soldiers under the command of Sir William Elphinstone.<sup>21</sup> William Dalrymple's historical account published in 2014, *Return of a King: Battle for Afghanistan*, deftly perpetuates the graveyard-esque myth. Dalrymple claimed in an interview in

<sup>19</sup> Fernando Gentilini, *Afghan Lessons: Culture, Diplomacy and Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Brookings Press, 2013), 79.

<sup>20</sup> The painting, which depicted the rout of the British in 1842, following the First Anglo-Afghan War, is now displayed at the Tate Gallery in London.

<sup>21</sup> Brydon was neither the sole survivor, nor the only man who arrived at Jalalabad safely on the eve of 13 January 1842, although the legend of the massacre of William Elphinstone's army remains etched in many historical and popular accounts. See Gentilini, *Afghan Lessons*; D. S. Richards, *The Savage Frontier: A History of the Anglo-Afghan Wars* (London: Macmillan, 1990). Cf. also Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, and Manan Ahmed, 'Adam's Mirror: The Frontier in the Imperial Imagination', *Economic & Political Weekly* 46, no. 13 (2011), 60–5.



2014 that in spite of the many 'uncomfortable similarities' between the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the current NATO intervention, the real 'precedent' for the present war is the First Anglo-Afghan War. He describes this war as 'arguably the greatest military humiliation ever suffered by the West in the East', in which an 'entire army of what was then the most powerful nation in the world was utterly destroyed by poorly-equipped tribesmen'. Despite stating that he finds the argument that Afghanistan is impossible to conquer historically untrue, Dalrymple nevertheless effectively resuscitated the graveyard myth when he conjectured: '[a]ny occupying army here will haemorrhage money and blood to little gain, and in the end most throw in the towel, as the British did in 1842, as the Russians did in 1988 and as Nato will do later this year'.<sup>22</sup> By exceptionalising Afghanistan as the place where all occupying armies would 'haemorrhage money and blood' rather than recognising that intervention on this scale would be expensive and involve bloodshed *wherever* it is conducted, Dalrymple constitutes Afghanistan as 'abnormal', as an indefatigable space excessively prone to warfare. This also glosses over equally unequivocal victories of the 'East' over the 'West', most spectacularly that of Ethiopia over Italy in the late nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, in any event, this first war was a patent triumph for the Afghans, and on all accounts the British Army, or more precisely the East India Company army, found itself morally and physically crushed. The Second Anglo-Afghan War on the other hand was a resounding success for the British, and the Third at least a tactical victory for the British Empire. The Second Anglo-Afghan War, fought between the United Kingdom and the Emirate of Afghanistan between 1878 and 1880, ended after the British emerged victorious against the Afghan rebels and the Afghans relinquished all control over their country's foreign relations and ceded various frontier areas to Britain, as laid out in the Treaty of Gandamak, which the new Emir, Yaqub, was forced to sign on 26 May 1879.<sup>24</sup> He also had to permit a permanent British mission in

<sup>22</sup> William Dalrymple, *Return of a King: Battle for Afghanistan* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014). Quotations are taken from his BBC interview at [www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-26483320](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-26483320) (last accessed 20 February 2020). For Dalrymple, Afghanistan then and now is, as the Emir who surrendered to the British reportedly claimed in 1839, 'a land of only stones and men'. It is also the case as of 2019 that NATO has not 'thrown in the towel'.

<sup>23</sup> For more on this see Raymond Jonas, *The Battle of Adwa: African Victory in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*. The first section of the treaty reads: 'His Highness the Amir of Afghanistan and its dependencies agrees to conduct his relations with Foreign States in accordance with the advice and wishes of the British Government. His Highness the Amir will enter into no engagements with Foreign States, and will not take up arms against any Foreign State, except with the concurrence of the British Government. On these conditions the British Government will support the Amir against any foreign aggression with money, arms, or troops, to be employed in whatsoever manner the British Government may judge best for this purpose. Should British troops at any time enter Afghanistan for the purpose of repelling foreign





FORAGING PARTY OF THE 67TH ATTACKED BY THE AFGHANS (NOV. 9, 1879).

Figure 1.2 Ambush in the Second Anglo-Afghan War.

duncan1980/DigitalVision Vectors via Getty Images

Afghanistan. The Third Anglo-Afghan War, fought between the months of May and August of 1919, ended in an armistice that affirmed the validity of the Durand Line as the political boundary between British India and the Emirate of Afghanistan. The Afghans were allowed to resume conduct of their foreign affairs in return for a 'promise to not foment trouble' on the border with British India (see Figure 1.2).<sup>25</sup>

Given that the British won, at least nominally, two of the three Afghan wars, the popular claim that Afghanistan is either unconquerable or impossible to defeat in battle is uncorroborated at best.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the fact that Afghanistan

aggression, they will return to their stations in British territory as soon as the object for which they entered has been accomplished.' See [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Treaty\\_of\\_Gandamak](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Gandamak) (last accessed 19 December 2019).

<sup>25</sup> Michael Barthorp, *Afghan Wars and the North-West Frontier 1839–1947* (London: Cassell, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Some scholars, including Barfield, who buy into the premise if not the terminology of the graveyard metaphor, contest the claim that the British 'won' the Third Anglo-Afghan War by emphasising the fact that Amanullah reclaimed control of the country's foreign policy and titular 'independence' from Britain. This overlooks Britain's growing disenchantment with Afghanistan and the end of the regular subsidies provided by Britain to Afghanistan, which effectively provoked the revolt that spelled the end of Amanullah's government. For more on

was never fully colonised, that is its quasi-colonial status, owed as much to British indecisiveness and lack of interest in the country as it did to any ineradicable difficulties in conquering the country or to the Afghans being a particularly formidable enemy. British vacillation and oscillation between the 'forward' and 'close border' policy with regard to the frontier was documented at the time, and archival research conducted for this book and beyond reveals the detrimental repercussions this had on both the Afghan polity and on relations between high-ranking individual administrators within the colonial apparatus responsible for dealing with Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> While this is explored further in the following chapters, to take one example, a confidential report entitled 'A Note on the Position of Affairs in Afghanistan' by W. L. Merewether, written in the summer of 1880, posits:

The Affghans require to be ruled by a strong hand. Treated justly and firmly they would soon settle down, and would gladly welcome a period of rest after the years of turmoil, uncertainty and oppressive rule they have had to pass through. The country, though mainly hilly, is far from a poor one. Dost Mohamed's speech that it 'produced nothing but men and stones' has been to readily adopted as a correct statement, but it is very far from being so.

The secret memorandum then proceeds to wax lyrical about the rich soil, the fertile passes and the revenue that could be easily generated by the British in India.<sup>28</sup> This and other late nineteenth-century correspondence turns on its head the notion that the people of Afghanistan were intrinsically unruly or indeed that its hilly terrain made it inherently difficult to conquer. This rendering of Afghanistan as a 'graveyard' also sidesteps contending visions of Afghanistan, including in the West. The historian Arnold Toynbee, for instance, contends that Afghanistan is best conceived of as the 'old world's eastern roundabout' since it is the place where trade routes from India, Iran and the 'Eurasian Steppe' all converged'. He claimed in 1961, that new roads over the Khyber Pass would 'reinstall Afghanistan in her traditional position in the world'.<sup>29</sup> Far from being an inaccessible land of perilous passes,

this, see Gerald Morgan, 'Myth and Reality in the Great Game', *Asian Affairs* 4, no. 1 (1973), 55–65.

<sup>27</sup> See Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans 550 BC–AD 1957* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1983); George Campbell, *Afghan Frontier: The Substance of a Speech Not Delivered* (1879). See Digitized Afghanistan Materials in English from the Arthur Paul Afghanistan Collection, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2010, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/afghanenglish/247/> (last accessed 17 January 2020); Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*; and Barfield, *Afghanistan*.

<sup>28</sup> Sir W. L. Merewether, 'A Note on the Position of Affairs in Afghanistan', confidential memorandum, 26 July 1880, L/PS/18/A36, and Political and Secret Department Correspondence, 24 July 1880, India Office Records, British Library.

<sup>29</sup> Arnold Toynbee, *Between Oxus and Jumma* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1961), 4.

Afghanistan in this imaginary is a central node in global movement of peoples and goods.

The graveyard of empires trope is perhaps most convincing and emphatic when it places the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the nine years that followed, at the core of its thesis. Although Soviet Russia's 'Afghan misadventure' was of an entirely different magnitude and intensity from the British forays into Afghanistan, the two nevertheless display elements of commonality and overlap. Before drawing out these parallels, a brief recounting of the build-up to the Soviet invasion is germane to the topic. In 1978 Mohammed Daud Khan, the President of the newly christened Afghan republic, was murdered in a coup that brought the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan to power. One of the two factions of the party, the Khalq, quickly became dominant, sidelined the more moderate Parcham faction and formed a direct alliance with the Soviet Union, abandoning Afghanistan's erstwhile policy of neutrality. The Khalqis instituted radical land reform, made drastic changes in family law and transformed the education system. Their allegiance to Marxist political ideology also saw them launch a wholesale attack on Islam, one that alienated large portions of the Afghan population. The ruling Khalq faction faced mass resistance, especially in the countryside, which it met with military force, resulting in the country's provinces erupting in rebellion, and what were initially localised uprisings soon spread with a vengeance across the country. The Soviet Union, disenchanted with and untrusting of the Khalqi leadership, after a failed attempt to remove the leadership indirectly, surmised that the safest option was to assume direct control of Afghanistan. Under the premise of restoring stability to Afghanistan, the Soviet Union invaded in December 1979, deposed the ruling Khalq faction and installed a Parchami, Babrak Karmal, as head of the state.<sup>30</sup>

Over the next ten years the Soviets engaged in an extensive war with the Afghan populace. Dominant narratives maintain that this decade is testament to, and exemplary of, the region's propensity for savage internecine warfare, and to the unbreakable warrior spirit of its inhabitants. The Soviet Union, on this account, glibly assumed that it could subdue the population of Afghanistan without much effort and rule the country until such time as a government that was subordinate to Moscow but capable of maintaining order in the country could be found. Instead they were confronted with the force of a countrywide

<sup>30</sup> For scholarship that focuses on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan see especially Henry Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985); Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979–1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979–89* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

jihad, which in the words of one commentator is the 'standard occurrence every time Afghanistan tries to change'.<sup>31</sup> The Mujahideen are said to have worn down the Soviets through attrition and in the process to have been instrumental in bringing down the colossus that was the Soviet Union. Therefore, in spite of the Soviet enemy's superior strength, better organisation and greater air power, the 'holy warriors', through grit and determination, and united in the name of God, managed to bring the sprawling empire to its knees. The outcome may be seemingly inexplicable given the asymmetry between the fighting forces, but is entirely predictable according to the prevailing discourse of the graveyard of empires.<sup>32</sup>

The conflict has been called the 'Soviet Union's Vietnam', and while the analogy is both flippant and misguided in its privileging of American experience as iconic and paradigmatic, it is also revealing. In the first instance, it situates the opposition that the Soviets faced in Afghanistan in context: the Mujahideen can be viewed as percipient political agents that resorted to arms in the face of a foreign invasion rather than as Islamic zealots propelled by an innate thirst for blood and violence. The descriptions of guerrilla warfare and Viet Minh fighters may be firmly embedded in an Orientalist framework that relies on the familiar Othering logics of racialisation and dehumanisation, but the comparison goes some way in debunking the 'exceptionalist' myth of an Afghan proclivity to fight without a cause by placing Afghan opposition to the Soviets in the broader context of 'Third World' anti-colonial resistance and a struggle for independence. While this narrative may be problematic in its paternalistic ethnocentrism or indeed in its romanticisation of 'Third World sensibilities', it nevertheless undermines the standard construal of Afghanistan as unique in its impregnability as well as in its knee-jerk hostility to outside intervention. The analogy also foregrounds the Cold War as the frame of reference, emphasising the way in which the conflict became as much about rivalry between the USA and the Soviet Union, with elements of a war by proxy in the manner in which the USA dealt with the Mujahideen. It ultimately underscores the oft-misplaced faith that the superpowers had in their own abilities to effect radical change in distant locales during the Cold War. Afghanistan, much like Vietnam, can be viewed as a sobering moment in a tale of imperial hubris.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Gentilini, *Afghan Lessons*, 81.

<sup>32</sup> Even authors who are sceptical of the use of the graveyard trope buy into some version of this account. See, for instance, two informative books that focus on the Mujahideen side of the equation: Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *Afghanistan – The Bear Trap: The Defeat of a Superpower* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2001), and Lester Grau and Michael Gress, *The Soviet–Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> However, Jonathan Steele in his *Ghosts of Afghanistan: Hard Truths and Foreign Myths* (London: Counterpoint, 2011) contests even this apparent Afghan victory and argues that the Soviets were largely successful in their military endeavours in Afghanistan.

The graveyard of empires trope also becomes less convincing when the extent of foreign aid, especially that of the CIA, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, to the Afghan resistance movement is disclosed. On the second 'Afghanistan Observance Day', 21 March 1983, Ronald Reagan, then president of the USA, could remark '[T]o watch the courageous Afghan freedom fighters battle modern arsenals with simple hand-held weapons is an inspiration to those who love freedom. Their courage teaches us a great lesson – that there are things in this world worth defending.'<sup>34</sup> However, by 1986, with the provision of the now legendary Stinger, the man-portable anti-aircraft missile, to the Mujahideen by the CIA and the Saudis, Afghan 'freedom fighters' were well placed to match the Soviet arsenal with their own sophisticated weapons system. According to conservative estimates the USA supplied over 250 launcher systems and over 500 Stinger missiles to the Mujahideen, along with the specialised training required to operate the system, and also considerably ramped up their project of overall military assistance.<sup>35</sup> The Stinger shifted the balance of power to such an extent that the term 'Stinger Effect' has been coined to specifically relay the 'game-changing' import of the weapon.<sup>36</sup> The Soviet–Afghan War was an indubitably asymmetrical one, but the Mujahideen – though far from pusillanimous – were nevertheless funded and militarily supported adequately enough to question popular representations of them as unarmed but fierce, and essentially antediluvian, militants. The extent of outside involvement and support for Afghan insurgents should not be underestimated. Apart from its supplying of billions of US dollars' worth of arms to the Mujahideen, the CIA's involvement was substantial even before the introduction of Stinger missiles.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> University of Texas archives, [www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/32183e.htm](http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/32183e.htm) (last accessed 20 February 2020).

<sup>35</sup> There is a vast literature on covert American assistance to the Mujahideen, much of it written or unearthed after 11 September 2001. For a detailed exposition of US involvement in the Soviet–Afghan war, see Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet invasion to September 10, 2001* (London: Penguin, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> The US congressman Charlie Wilson, who was instrumental in funding the Stingers for the Mujahideen, reportedly claimed that before the introduction of the Stinger, the Mujahideen never won a set-piece battle with the Soviets, and that after it was introduced, the Mujahideen never again lost one. See George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007). See also Michael Phillips, 'Launching the Missile that Made History', *Wall Street Journal*, 1 October 2011. However, it should be noted that the extent to which this was a 'game changer' is disputed, and there are those who argue that the Stingers merely accelerated a decision that had already been taken.

<sup>37</sup> The National Security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski divulged the scope of this in 1997 when speaking about the Carter administration's Afghan strategy against the Soviets. In his words: '[w]e immediately launched a twofold process when we heard that the Soviets had entered Afghanistan. The first involved direct reactions and sanctions focused on the Soviet Union, and both the State Department and the National Security Council prepared long lists of sanctions to be adopted, of steps to be taken to increase the international costs to the Soviet Union of their



This surface review of the history of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1988 is pertinent to the discussion above because it problematises the notion that Afghanistan is and has always been uniquely poised to repel all invaders. Just as a nominally independent Afghanistan served British interests in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Soviet Russia ultimately lacked the will and resources to continue to hold Afghanistan indefinitely. It is not some trans-historical, congenital Afghan predisposition or 'antibody' that brought the end of Soviet rule in Afghanistan. The Soviets withdrew because Afghanistan became an increasingly expensive proposition for an empire that was crumbling from within and that had a new leader with a different vision for his country, but only after it had caused widespread damage and destruction to the Afghan state and its inhabitants over the course of a decade.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, although much is made of Afghanistan's harsh climate and unforgiving terrain, it has a diverse topographical composition and shares a border with six countries. Occupying a large area at the geographical core of Asia, Afghanistan's deserts, mountains and steppes have been habitually penetrated by caravans and plundering conquerors.<sup>39</sup> While this variation in terrain, topography and climate across the country often serves to embolden centrifugal forces, it has not historically precluded occupation. It is to lend credence to the myth that Afghanistan is impenetrable that images of desolate passes, unscalable peaks, bleak winters and intolerable summers are conjured with such gusto. Thus Major Dan, Cold War veteran of the US Marine Corps can write:

Afghanistan is not a large country . . . and is not densely populated, but the terrain and people are both ferocious. Mountainous and rocky, Afghanistan has foiled many invaders over the years, from the British in the 19th century to the Russians (Soviets) in the 20th century and to the Americans in the 21st century. Situated on the route from India and Pakistan to the west, Afghanistan has been lusted after but never tamed. The

actions. And the second course of action led to my going to Pakistan a month or so after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, for the purpose of coordinating with the Pakistanis a joint response, the purpose of which would be to make the Soviets bleed for as much and as long as is possible; and we engaged in that effort in a collaborative sense with the Saudis, the Egyptians, the British, the Chinese, and we started providing weapons to the Mujaheddin, from various sources again – for example, some Soviet arms from the Egyptians and the Chinese. We even got Soviet arms from the Czechoslovak communist government, since it was obviously susceptible to material incentives; and at some point we started buying arms for the Mujaheddin from the Soviet army in Afghanistan, because that army was increasingly corrupt.' NSA Archive, George Washington University, [www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-17/brzezinski1.html](http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-17/brzezinski1.html) (last accessed 14 March 2019).

<sup>38</sup> This includes over one million civilian deaths and the creation of ten million refugees. See Noor Ahmed Khalili, 'Afghanistan: Demographic Consequences of War, 1978–87', *Central Asian Survey* 10, no. 3 (1991), 101–26.

<sup>39</sup> Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, 5.

Soviet Army's defeat after 10 years of failure was a major factor in the break up of the Soviet Union. The United States has fared little better after over a decade of trying.<sup>40</sup>

Critical political geography as a sub-discipline has made crucial interventions in exposing the ways in which the fields of geopolitics and conventional approaches to political geography rely on a racialised ontological framework to make sense of the world. Environmental and geographic determinism has been critiqued as a racialised discourse, especially in treatises on climate, disease and sanitation in Africa.<sup>41</sup> While pre-colonial and colonial discourses on the inherently dangerous nature of the 'tropics' owing to inclement climatic conditions and their adverse impact on the constitution of the white man have all but disappeared,<sup>42</sup> the resort to a vocabulary that relies heavily on the topographical perils and hibernal climes of a region in constructing it as a figurative necropolis is not much different in either tenor or import. Pictorial depictions such as the above-mentioned Lady Butler's *Remnants of an Army* – in which a blood-covered frozen wasteland forms the backdrop to Brydon and his horse – among others of this period, only seem to validate written and verbal accounts of Afghanistan's treacherous terrain. Compounding the problem are the perfidious, belligerent and quintessentially inward-looking inhabitants of this land.

The graveyard topos has been resurrected to claim that the war in Afghanistan is 'unwinnable' owing to the flinty nature of the country and its people. Policy documents, such as the Cato Institute's white paper – tellingly entitled 'Escaping the Graveyard of Empires: A Strategy to Exit Afghanistan' – on Obama's strategy in Afghanistan, routinely evoke the danger of forgetting that 'there's a reason why it [Afghanistan] has been described as "graveyard of empires"' and warn that unless America rethinks its operations and scales them down drastically it risks 'meeting a similar fate'.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, the scholar Terry H. Anderson, a long-time critic of American foreign policy in the Middle East, admonishes the

<sup>40</sup> Major Dan 'January 13, 1842: Only one survivor of British Army in Afghanistan!' January 13, 2014: [www.historyandheadlines.com/january-13-1842-one-survivor-british-army-afghanistan/](http://www.historyandheadlines.com/january-13-1842-one-survivor-british-army-afghanistan/) (last accessed 20 February 2020).

<sup>41</sup> On the shifting role of geography as a development factor in the public imagination, see Eric Sheppard, 'Geography, Nature and the Question of Development', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 1, no. 1 (2011), 46–75. His argument is that although determinism of the 'crude' variety has been superseded by new 'critical' approaches, these communities of scholarship also endorse a socio-spatial ontology that underwrites a stageist, teleological conception of economic development, which is enabled by globalising neo-liberal capitalism.

<sup>42</sup> Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (London: Routledge, 1995) examines this imperial obsession with sanitation and hygiene through a history of soap as an icon of white civilisation. 'Equatorial' Africa, in the colonial imagination, was the land of the unclean and impure.

<sup>43</sup> Malou Innocent and Ted Galen Carpenter, 'Escaping the "Graveyard of Empires": A Strategy to Exit Afghanistan', Cato Institute White Paper, 2009.



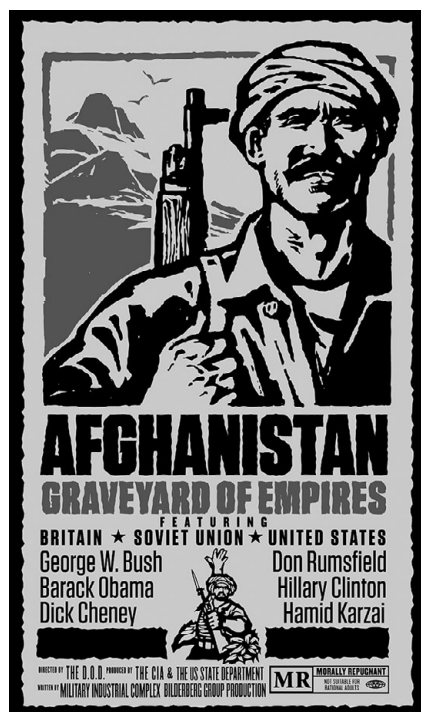


Figure 1.3 Afghanistan: graveyard of empires.  
Liberty Maniacs

Bush administration against its intervention in Afghanistan because Afghans 'are a fiercely independent people' and 'for centuries the rugged terrain has been called the Graveyard of Empires'.<sup>44</sup> Cartoons and political satire in the Anglosphere regularly echo this sentiment, aiming to serve as an admonition against an expansive Afghan strategy (see Figure 1.3).

The graveyard of empires trope, even for those who are more circumspect about the sweeping nature of its generalisations and/or its applicability before the nineteenth century, is so compelling because it perpetuates the institutionalised convention of superficial engagement with Afghanistan: it is one more

<sup>44</sup> Terry H. Anderson, *Bush's Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10. Anderson also recites the myth about Brydon, claiming that the British learned about Afghanistan's graveyard-like qualities the hard way, when their sole soldier escaped the country's mountains and people 'wounded and on a dying horse'. Parenthetically, although many commentators have claimed that Afghanistan has been referred to as the graveyard of empires for centuries, this is does not materialise in the archives. Trawling through the India Office Records between 1870 and 1950 reveals zero occurrences of this epithet vis-à-vis Afghanistan.

way to designate Afghanistan, both historically and contemporaneously, as straightforward and easily digestible. However, the trope is more than a clever misnomer: it pithily weaves together the skeins of geographical determinism, ahistoricism and racialised renditions of the Afghan people. It is a profoundly Othering discourse, whose most virulent detractors are ironically those that object to the word 'empire' as being applicable to the current intervention. Therefore, in contrast to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's observation that '[s]everal countries have exhausted themselves pounding that country',<sup>45</sup> a reviewer of David Isby's *Afghanistan – Graveyard of Empires: A New History of the Borderland* writes: '[t]he graveyard of empires metaphor indeed belongs in the graveyard of clichés. The Coalition in Afghanistan is not some imperial conquest, is not the Soviets, and is not the Victorian British. Nor do the Afghans perceive it as such.'<sup>46</sup> Afghanistan then remains a graveyard, even if the current intervention is mislabelled as empire.<sup>47</sup>

As this book seeks to demonstrate, the lazy historiography that references past events in a haphazard way is perhaps par for the course when it comes to Afghanistan. This is because it is symptomatic of a long tradition of what can be called imperial negligence – at least in strategic and military discourse – albeit periodically interrupted by moments of perfervid commitment, that continues to govern Afghanistan's interaction with the outside world and to shape the knowledge generated about the country and its people. Even in its more watered-down versions, which contend that Afghanistan is not technically 'unconquerable' and instead direct attention to the difficulty in imposing a central government, especially but not only by a foreign power, the graveyard moniker remains a racialised construction, an ostensible de-mystification of the Afghan Other that falls back on the civilised/uncivilised bifurcation of the world, for two principal, and mutually constitutive, reasons. Firstly, through its selective evocation of history, or 'calculated forgetting',<sup>48</sup> Afghanistan is portrayed as an exceptionally intractable part of the world. A partisan amnesia makes it legitimate to claim that Afghanistan was never colonised in spite of multiple sustained efforts. Not only did the British not lose all three Afghan

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Tanner, *Afghanistan*, 292.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Cassidy, 'David Isby's *Afghanistan – Graveyard of Empires: A New History of the Borderland*', *Parameters* 41 (2011), 153–5, [http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/articles/2011summer/bookreviews/isby\\_afghanistan.pdf](http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/articles/2011summer/bookreviews/isby_afghanistan.pdf) (last accessed 20 February 2020).

<sup>47</sup> See especially the second volume of BBC Two's two-part documentary on Afghanistan, 'The Graveyard of Empires'. (The first volume is called 'The Great Game', which is the trope I address in the next section.)

<sup>48</sup> I borrow the term from Debra Thomson, who also speaks of 'racial aphasia' in a related context: 'Through, against, and beyond the Racial State: The Transnational Stratum of Race', in Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda and Robbie Shilliam, eds., *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (London: Routledge, 2014), 43–60.

wars, but they were also only half-hearted about making Afghanistan part of the British Raj.<sup>49</sup> Indeed in 1875 Colonel. H. B. Lumsden, who led a mission to Afghanistan in 1857, dismissed the country and British relations with it as a 'waste of blood and treasure'.<sup>50</sup> And while the Soviet Union was more committed to occupying Afghanistan, this commitment wavered in the face both of a dramatic increase in US- and Saudi-led support for the opposition *and* an imploding domestic economy. Secondly, it euphemistically upholds and promulgates the already popular image of Afghans as an unruly, backward and fundamentally untameable people. The denizens of Afghanistan, in this narrative, have always been suspicious of foreigners and have become desensitised to war and adversity. This ties into specious reasoning and commentaries on 'Pashtunwali' and 'tribal codes', which I explore in greater detail in a later chapter.<sup>51</sup>

The graveyard of empires trope ultimately forecloses debate and limits the range of 'viable' options when it comes to Afghanistan. Afghanistan is produced, often adventitiously, as a land of mystery, a vacuum that allows for some measure of distance and impunity from events within and relating to Afghanistan. But this mysterious nature sits with an uneasy over-determination, even premonitory prevision, of Afghanistan's future: as an always-already foundering project, as a state destined to crumble, as an inevitable site of failure for all foreign interventions and as an inescapable harbinger for a fate that has already been sealed. Even when it is 'our' failure, there is an intrinsic narcissism in the graveyard of empires trope in the very specific manner in which it sets the limits of what can be known about Afghanistan. With its selective reliance on the past, it reduces Afghanistan to a place where the present complex and messy realities can be overridden by a cursory glance at imperial history. At its most potent, in the way that it presents 'the past' as the key to Afghanistan's future and present, the graveyard metaphor is actually an extended allegory for the current practices of knowledge production when it comes to Afghanistan: of suspicious historical accuracy and at least partially attributable to Afghanistan's 'quasi-coloniality', this racialised trope informs current policy decisions and will plausibly continue to impress on future engagement with the country.

<sup>49</sup> See especially Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, and James Hevia, *The Imperial Security State: British Colonial Knowledge and Empire-Building in Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>50</sup> H. B. Lumsden, 'Rough Notes for a Lecture on Affghanistan and Our Relations with It', official memorandum, 16994, pp. 1–2, India Office Records, British Library.

<sup>51</sup> As I show in Chapter 3, representations of Afghanistan as an atavistic, tribal society are derived largely from insight gleaned selectively from colonial accounts and are used schematically to vindicate the current conceptions of Afghans as existing in a state of nature, seemingly motivated by primeval concerns. These representations are neither products of deep scholarly engagement nor based on ethnographic treatments of intricate social relations.

## The Great Game

Afghanistan's popular reputation as a graveyard of empires finds its academic counterpart in its position in the so-called Great Game, the term given to Anglo-Russian rivalry and jostling for supremacy in Central Asia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In most modern historiography, Anglo-Russian competition in the region at the time is the master narrative, with the Great Game its central trope or 'organising principle'. This meta-narrative has also given rise to the geopolitical institutionalisation of Afghanistan's position as a 'buffer state', the zone that the British had to strategically defend by way of ensuring the Soviet Union did not encroach on its Indian territory. In spite of the relative absence of 'the Great Game' as a term in the archives and official correspondence of the time,<sup>52</sup> it continues to be employed widely and has in fact gained currency in the twenty-first century, with multiple scholars increasingly adverting to a 'New Great Game' as a way of conceptualising modern geopolitics in Afghanistan and Central Asia.<sup>53</sup> This New Great Game, according to its semantic engineers, is the contest between the USA and other NATO countries on the one hand, and Russia on the other, for influence, power, hegemony and profit in Central Asia and the Transcaucasus, a continuation of old dynamics in a different guise, with Afghanistan's position as a key but truculent potential partner remaining constant.<sup>54</sup>

The idea of an enduring antagonistic relationship between Russia and Britain in general, and the metaphoric Great Game in particular, has been the source of fierce contention and witness to a concerted effort on the part of historians working on Afghanistan to refute what they refer to as the fallacy of the Great Game. Ben Hopkins observes that the Great Game is the 'central conceptual prism through which Afghanistan is currently viewed', a 'myth' that 'mistakenly

<sup>52</sup> For instance, as the historian Nigel Allan states: 'the term "Great Game" has been thrown about with great abandon in the modern period'. See 'Defining Place and People in Afghanistan', *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics* 42, no. 88 (2001), 548. 'However', he goes on, 'with the exception of a single utterance in 1834, it did not reappear until 1927'. See also Martin Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination: Colonial Knowledge and Anglo-Afghan Relations, 1808–1878* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) for both the relative 'newness' of the term and the way in which it has detracted attention from Anglo-Afghan relations to British–Soviet imperial rivalry.

<sup>53</sup> For evidence of this burgeoning literature, see Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002); Lutz Kleveman, *The New Great Game: Blood and Oil in Central Asia* (New York: Grove Press, 2004); Rein Mullerson, *Central Asia: A Chessboard and Player in the New Great Game* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Mohammed E. Ahrari, *The New Great Game in Muslim Central Asia* (Honolulu, HI: University Press of the Pacific, 2002); Muhammad Mazni, *The New Great Game: Oil and Gas Politics in Central Eurasia* (New York: Raider Publishing International, 2008); and Rob Johnson, *Oil, Islam and Conflict: Central Asia since 1945* (London: Reaktion, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> Matthew Edwards, 'The New Great Game and the New Great Gamers: Disciples of Kipling and Mackinder', *Central Asian Survey* 22, no. 1 (2003), 83–102.

over emphasizes the importance of a 'game' which frankly did not exist'.<sup>55</sup> Seymour Becker traces the etymology of the phrase and shows how, for the original architect of the term, Captain Arthur Connolly, the game metaphor 'signified a contest in which the Russians were Britain's *potential* opponents, but the Central Asians were her *immediate* ones', and indeed stressed the importance of Anglo-Russian cooperation in the region.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, for Connolly the 'Great Game' in essence was a noble one with overt 'humanitarian associations' and betrayed none of the 'uneasy adventurist quality' that is commonly ascribed to the metaphor.<sup>57</sup> This is particularly relevant since most contemporary constructions are based on Peter Hopkirk's definition of the term, set out in his eponymous book, perhaps the most widely read treatise on the 'Great Game', as shorthand for a 'shadowy struggle for political ascendancy' in Central Asia, especially Afghanistan, between Russia and the United Kingdom.<sup>58</sup> Hopkirk for his part has taken the notion from Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and like his contemporaries 'read the Great Game back into the six decades prior to the publication of *Kim* and forward into the Soviet and post-Soviet era'.<sup>59</sup>

James Hevia in his pioneering study of the British colonial security state examines how the Great Game metaphor and its proponents have obscured the relation between science and empire by relying on Kipling's slightly Quixotic rendition of fantasy and romantic adventure as the guiding pillars of Britain's imperial enterprise.<sup>60</sup> Further, as Gerald Morgan insists, the Great Game is a misplaced metaphor that masks and sanitises the enormous violence that actually transpired in the era, including three British invasions of Afghanistan and recurrent clashes on the North-West Frontier. Finally, Martin Bayly in his detailed study of Anglo-Afghan relations between 1808 and 1879 has illustrated how the Great Game as a trope has been both instrumental in and bolstered by the evolution of a certain colonial knowledge community around Afghanistan, one that has retrospectively made a small part of the British narrative of the time into the lynchpin of the 'story of Afghanistan'.<sup>61</sup> My own research points to a British preoccupation with Russian expansion, but this interest remains largely limited to infrastructural and political developments within Russia. The Home Correspondence records in the India Office Records at the British Library, as well as the 'political and secret department memoranda' of the 1870s, all equivocate about having British agents in Kabul. Even

<sup>55</sup> Benjamin Hopkins, *The Myth of the 'Great Game': The Anglo-Sikh Alliance and Rivalry*, Centre of South Asian Studies Occasional Paper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2–4.

<sup>56</sup> Seymour Becker, 'The "Great Game": The History of an Evocative Phrase', *Asian Affairs* 43, no. 1 (2012), 65.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. <sup>58</sup> Hopkirk, *The Great Game*. <sup>59</sup> Hevia, *The Imperial Security State*, 12.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Morgan, 'Myth and Reality in the Great Game'; Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination*.

if one were to argue that British policy changed in relation to Afghanistan from one of 'masterly inactivity' to a more intrusive one, correspondence between British and Russian agents reveals that the two parties collaborated more often than not on the 'Affghan question'. In 1874, the Russian Prince Gortachakov wrote to his British counterparts stressing the virtue of a truce and the continuing need to carry on the work of civilisation:

If on either side the two Governments exercise their ascendance over the States placed within the range of their natural influence in order to deter them from all aggression, there is reason to hope that no violent collision will occur to disturb the repose of Central Asia, and interfere with the work of civilization which it is the duty and interest of the two great Empires to bring to a favourable issue.<sup>62</sup>

In light of this sustained scholarly critique, even uprooting, of the Great Game metaphor, its continuing use and especially its revival in present literature through the discourse of the 'New Great Game' is striking. Not only is the Great Game a projection onto a diverse range of events that were conceived differently by the historical actors involved, but these actors themselves, not least the British Empire and the Soviet Union, evolved and changed remarkably from when the Great Game supposedly began in the 1830s to when it allegedly ended or was qualitatively transformed after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.<sup>63</sup> The Great Game trope is, however, problematic for a multitude of reasons over and above its tenuous historical underpinnings. It is emblematic of the ways in which the practices of knowledge production continue both to attempt to render Afghanistan legible and to shroud 'it' in a world of mystifying metaphors. Afghanistan is constructed as a pawn in a game of imperial stratagems, deliberately divested of all agency and deprived of a narrative in which the history of Afghanistan is a history of the Afghans. The Great Game narrative continues to exercise such a hold over the Western – and more specifically, the Anglophone – imagination because it sustains and propagates the familiar pigeonholing of Afghanistan as the land of intrigue, possessed of an exotic, unruly mystique over which great powers vie for dominance and paramouncy. In its indissolubility, the Great Game conceit typifies the inseparability of power relations from relations of knowledge. More specifically, it forms part of a larger colonial effort to *normalise* a set of power relations by the continued rehearsal of a hoary stereotype. This is what Bhabha calls 'the repetition of guilt, justification, pseudoscientific

<sup>62</sup> O. T. Burne, 'Memorandum on the Question of British or Native Agents in Afghanistan', 20 July 1875, Political and Secret Department Memoranda, India Office Records, British Library; the tone changes to a more conspiratorial one by the late 1880s, as evinced in the 'Letters from Sir Frederick Roberts Regarding Afghanistan', 22 May 1885, R/12/LIB/104, India Office Records, British Library.

<sup>63</sup> For more on this see Hevia, *The Imperial Security State*, especially 11–13.

theories, superstition, spurious authorities and classification' and is, paradoxically, the only way in which the Other can be made intelligible.<sup>64</sup> It prevents us from imagining Afghanistan otherwise.

The Great Game also continues to be the abiding narrative because it slots Afghanistan into the established IR *problematique* of the balance of power. The BBC's 'Afghanistan: The Great Game' (2012), although a meticulously researched historical documentary, is another tribute to British 'obsession' with its rivalry with Russia over India to which Afghanistan was considered the key gateway.<sup>65</sup> In a world of great power politics and competition, Afghanistan occupied a strategic location as a 'buffer state', and the metaphor endures because it provides a convenient reduction of Afghanistan's political history to an exoteric idiom.<sup>66</sup> The 'gameification' of Afghan history is a further reminder of Afghanistan's position in a hierarchical world of ostensibly sovereign states – its existence is contingent on those who control the material and imaginative resources. The Great Game as a structuring discourse establishes that, in a slightly irreverent paraphrasing of Alexander Wendt, Afghanistan is what great powers make of it.<sup>67</sup> At its most ruthless, the metaphor is another instance of the trivialising and systematic forgetting of Afghan politics, histories, and lifeworlds.<sup>68</sup> It is almost an admission of the flippancy with which Afghanistan continues to be treated by the superpowers; they are free to invade and retreat, engage and disengage as they wish, playing and dropping the Game when they see fit. Ultimately, the trope rests on the implicit assumption that certain (Afghan) subjectivities are both less important and easily manipulable, and in so doing it constructs Afghanistan as a certain type of 'intervenable' space, justifying a set of policies and actions towards it.

### Pathology and Disease

Both the Great Game and the graveyard of empires are historical metaphors that are (purportedly) rooted in particular experiences of Afghanistan's interaction

<sup>64</sup> Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man', 131. For Bhabha these strategies are instances of a disavowal of difference that gives rise to a rupture or splitting of the discourse of Otherness through what he calls 'mimicry'. This for him is the manifestation of a contradictory colonial economy of desire when dealing with the 'not quite/not white'.

<sup>65</sup> 'Afghanistan: The Great Game; A Personal View', BBC Two, 2012.

<sup>66</sup> On the Great Game and the balance of power, see Raju Thomas, 'The South Asian Security Balance in a Western Dominant World', in Michel Fortman, James Wirtz and T. V. Paul, eds., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 305–33.

<sup>67</sup> Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization* 6, no. 2 (1992), 391–425.

<sup>68</sup> For a coruscating take-down of IR for precisely the reasons listed above, see Sankaran Krishna, 'Race, Amnesia, and the Education of International Relations', *Alternatives* 26, no. 4 (2001), 401–24.



with the outside world. They are crucial elements in the construction of Afghanistan as an imagined political space or a 'discursive regime', and they are in turn complemented by a litany of other metaphors and tropes that imbue with meaning and make possible this idea of Afghanistan. One such leitmotif is that of illness or disease. We have already encountered Dalrymple's reading of the US-led intervention of Afghanistan – one that 'haemorrhage[s] money and blood'. Barfield, likewise, refers to the Taliban insurgency as an 'infection', one that needs a prolonged course of antibiotics to be fully 'eliminated'.<sup>69</sup> These constitute only two of many references to Afghanistan as a space of disease. Anatomical metaphors are often utilised in policy and even academic discourse on Afghanistan, contributing a sense of urgency to 'our mission' to 'save' the country.<sup>70</sup> The US-led military operation currently under way in Afghanistan changed its name from 'Operation Enduring Freedom' to 'Operation Freedom's Sentinel' in 2015. There are two meanings of the word 'sentinel', the first of which refers to a soldier or a guard. According to the second definition, used widely across the fields of health and medicine, a 'sentinel' is an indicator of the presence of disease. This may be a coincidence, but Afghanistan's subjectivation as a space of interminable and often terminal disease suggests otherwise.

The spectre of disease certainly abounds in policy and public discourse around Afghanistan. A *New York Times Magazine* article titled 'Warlordistan' declared in 2003 that the 'rebuilding of Afghanistan ... has so far been a sputtering disappointment' because '[l]ike many of its people the nation is missing limbs'.<sup>71</sup> In keeping with this spirit, Afghanistan as a nation has been variously depicted as 'festering', 'pathological' and infested with 'cancerous growths'.<sup>72</sup> For instance, both *Time* and the *Nation* (in 2011 and 2006 respectively) have labelled Afghanistan 'the festering wound', with the former also defining the US war in Afghanistan as 'a chronic and oozing pus-filled wound'.<sup>73</sup> Richard Holbrooke,

<sup>69</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 325.

<sup>70</sup> Although this predates the current NATO intervention, Mikhail Gorbachev in his seminal address in Vladivostok described the conflict in Afghanistan, then in its seventh year, as a 'bleeding wound': quoted in Svetlana Slavranskaya and Thomas Blanton, eds., 'Afghanistan and the Soviet Withdrawal 1989 20 Years Later', US National Security Archive, Electronic Briefing Book no. 272, 15 February 2009, [www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB272/](http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB272/) (last accessed 20 February 2020).

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Tanner, *Afghanistan*, 330; for the ways in which the USA has actively contributed to debilitating the Afghan population see Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 90.

<sup>72</sup> For some examples of the trope see David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (London: Hurst, 2009); Marwa Farag, 'Eikenberry Assesses U.S. Role in Afghanistan', *Stanford Daily*, 31 January 2012; Polly Toynbee, 'Was the War on Afghanistan Worth It?', *Guardian*, 12 November 2002.

<sup>73</sup> Mark Thompson, 'The Festering Wound: U.S. Air Strike Kills at Least 25 Pakistani Troops', *Time*, 26 November 2011; and Robert Scheer, 'Meanwhile Back in Afghanistan', *The Nation*, 30 January 2006.

Obama's special envoy to Afghanistan and arguably the most important diplomat at the time in the region, has likewise, referred to the 'festering wound of Afghanistan'.<sup>74</sup>

David Kilkullen's argument in his *Accidental Guerrilla* – heralded as a path-breaking scholarly work of immediate practical consequence – is structured around an extended medical analogy wherein most insurgents suffer from an 'accidental syndrome' caused by a 'pathological' cycle of infection, contagion, intervention and rejection. To break this cycle of disease, he proposes an alternate counter-insurgency strategy, one aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the local populace: gentle, culturally sensitive 'armed social work'.<sup>75</sup> He also advocates the 'persistent presence' of Western troops, but cautions that this presence is not a 'panacea'.<sup>76</sup> Carrying the metaphor forward, he dwells in some detail on what makes Afghanistan such an involuted proposition and on the potential reaction to an ill-conceived intervention:

It is this interplay between terrain, population, Taliban, and terrorists that makes Afghanistan such a difficult, dangerous, and complicated environment. It also means that Afghanistan . . . is a source of insight into the patterns – global terrorists exploiting accidental guerrillas, societal *antibodies* emerging in response to Western intervention, the risk of playing into the hands of an AQ exhaustion strategy – which I have already described in general terms.<sup>77</sup>

Creating a biopolitical or, in more precise Foucauldian vernacular, a 'state-racist'<sup>78</sup> rift between the 'enemy' and the 'population', Kilkullen propounds a surgical intervention that is not heavy-handed, expounding on his choices thus: '[m]ore particularly, search-and-destroy operations tend to create a popular backlash and contribute to the "antibody response" that generates large numbers of accidental guerrillas and pushes the population and the enemy together'.<sup>79</sup> This application of a medical lexicon is a key feature of the counter-insurgency literature where the 'host nation' goes through a process of remedial care, from a moribund patient to a convalescent and ultimately 'self-sufficient' one. The stages are clearly delineated in the widely hailed counter-insurgency (COIN) manual *FM 3-24* as (i) 'stop the bleeding', (ii) 'inpatient care – recovery' and (iii) 'outpatient care – movement to self-sufficiency'.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Gregoria Betizza, 'Obama, Afghanistan and the Trust Deficit', Aspen Institute, 29 April 2009, [www.aspeninstitute.it/aspennia-online/article/obama-afghanistan-and-trust-deficit](http://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspennia-online/article/obama-afghanistan-and-trust-deficit) (last accessed 20 February 2020); incidentally the article refers to Holbrooke as 'AfPak' envoy, a new and contested regional appellation that I dedicate a section to in the next chapter.

<sup>75</sup> Kilkullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, especially 30–8. <sup>76</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 41; emphasis added.

<sup>78</sup> 'State-racist' is an important concept that I revisit and explore in more detail in the next chapter.

<sup>79</sup> Kilkullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, 96.

<sup>80</sup> United States Army, *Army Field Manual 3-24* (United States: Department of the Army, 2006); and United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Derek Gregory has shown how medicinal rhetoric of a certain kind is essentially therapeutic for the *American public*, acting as a salve through the optics of rescue operations and surgical procedures. In the case of Afghanistan, it portrays the 2001 intervention as humane and salubrious in an effort to override or mitigate the negative press generated by evidence of torture of detainees in, for instance, Abu Ghraib, and espouses a commitment to and faith in the US armed forces.<sup>81</sup> This is closely related to my argument that the medicalisation discourse used habitually, but by no means exclusively, to describe socio-political events and circumstances in Afghanistan, is a profoundly dispossessing one and is far from innocuous.<sup>82</sup> The evocative rendering of Afghanistan as being in a state of chronic illness – afflicted and atrophying – is a pernicious political manoeuvre that sanctions, even demands, certain types of ‘intervention’. The labelling of Afghanistan as ‘dysfunctional’ is yet another tactic to deny the country and its people agency by casting them as hapless patients in need of rehabilitation and normalisation.<sup>83</sup> The ‘enemy’ is a malignant tumour on a decaying body politic, making our incursions not only desirable and indeed noble, but also vitally indispensable. The common-sense refrain then becomes: we *must* save Afghanistan from itself, and by so doing save the world from the deadly effects of potential, nay likely, contagion. Exemplifying this trend, in his speech on Afghanistan to the White House in June 2011, President Obama said that he would ‘work with the Pakistani Government to root out the *cancer* of violent extremism’.<sup>84</sup> Not only does this imagery saturate Anglophone discourse outside Afghanistan, but it has also been increasingly internalised by Afghans living in the country. The Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, himself channelled Obama seven years later when he referred to the ‘cancer in the region’, i.e. terrorism, claiming that it needed ‘rooting out’. He also lamented the ‘plague’ of terrorism and

<sup>81</sup> Derek Gregory, ‘“The Rush to the Intimate”: Counterinsurgency and the Cultural Turn’, *Radical Philosophy* 150, no. 4 (2008), 18.

<sup>82</sup> The Ottoman Empire’s figurative construal as the ‘sick man of Europe’ serves as the example par excellence, and the COIN manual claims to be generic to all counter-insurgency operations globally.

<sup>83</sup> For a few examples of work that use the word ‘dysfunctional’ to describe the current situation in Afghanistan, see Simon Chesterman, ‘Walking Softly in Afghanistan: The Future of UN State-Building’, *Survival* 44, no. 3 (2002), 37–45; Christopher Freeman, ‘Dissonant Discourse: Forging Islamist States through Secular Models – The Case of Afghanistan’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 15, no. 3 (2002), 522–47; Whitney Azoy, *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2011); and Sebastian Mallaby, ‘The Reluctant Imperialist: Terrorism, Failed States, and the Case for American Empire’, *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 2 (2002), 2–7.

<sup>84</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, ‘Remarks by the President on the Way Forward’, White House, 22 June 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-afghanistan> (emphasis added; last accessed 23 December 2019).

extremism in Afghanistan.<sup>85</sup> Terrorism in Afghanistan is a multi-focal and metastasising disease that can be 'rooted out' and torn asunder only through aptly named 'surgical strikes'.

The border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan are considered the epicentre of this disease, the necrotised bits most in need of recuperation or removal. To shift registers from the metaphoric to the literal for a second, research has shown that the number of polio cases and drone strikes closely mirrored each other in Afghanistan between 2004 and 2012.<sup>86</sup> There were relatively few polio cases in Afghanistan and Pakistan until mid 2008, and drone strikes were also infrequent. Polio cases hit their peak in 2011–12, as did drone attacks.<sup>87</sup> This is not a coincidence, but a result of the 'fake immunisation' campaign against hepatitis B that the CIA orchestrated in 2011 in Abbottabad in a failed attempt to obtain the DNA of Osama bin Laden's relatives.<sup>88</sup> When this elaborate campaign was laid bare, vaccination programmes began to be viewed with distrust as a smokescreen for intelligence gathering by the USA ahead of drone strikes. Polio cases continue to rise in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in a shocking reversal of the trend observed until 2008. Leaders in Waziristan have declared that their suspicions of immunisation campaigns as 'being used to spy for America against the Mujahideen' are founded and instituted 'a ban on administering polio jabs'.<sup>89</sup> Over 3.5 million children have gone unvaccinated as a result of this boycott, with the virus spreading from Pakistan and Afghanistan to further afield in the Middle East.<sup>90</sup> Afghanistan may be a space of disease, but the elision of our hand in creating it as such is at least as damaging as the lurid depictions that continue to be peddled about it.

But Afghanistan is depicted as the wracked and tortured land of malaise also as part of the more general process of the displacement of Afghan subjectivity in a colonial strategy of using metaphors, tropes, metonymy and euphemisms to create identities that can be labelled 'actionable', in both senses of the term, that is, as warranting action towards them and as being of practical value.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Ashraf Ghani, #AfghanPresident, <https://twitter.com/ashrafghani?lang=en> (last accessed 14 March 2019).

<sup>86</sup> Jonathan Kennedy, 'How Drone Strikes and a Fake Vaccination Program Have Inhibited Polio Eradication in Pakistan: An Analysis of National Level Data', *International Journal of Health Services* 47, no. 4 (2017), 807–25.

<sup>87</sup> Jonathan Kennedy, 'Pakistan, Polio and the CIA', *London Review of Books Blog*, 2017, [www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2017/09/08/jonathan-kennedy/pakistan-polio-and-the-cia/](http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2017/09/08/jonathan-kennedy/pakistan-polio-and-the-cia/) (last accessed 20 February 2018).

<sup>88</sup> Saeed Shah, 'CIA Organised Fake Vaccination Drive to Get Osama bin Laden's Family DNA', *Guardian*, 11 July 2011.

<sup>89</sup> Haji Mujatba, 'Pakistan Militants Ban Polio Jabs, Threaten Actions', *Reuters*, 16 June 2012.

<sup>90</sup> Kennedy, 'Pakistan, Polio'.

<sup>91</sup> For a by no means exhaustive list of works that employ the words 'malaise', 'tortured' and 'wracked', see Douglas Wissing, 'General Malaise', *Huffington Post*, 19 January 2013; Astri

Indeed, the *metaphoric* is a ‘process of repression and substitution’ through ‘fixity’,<sup>92</sup> and although it has a long imperial pedigree, it is relied on especially heavily as a tactics of appropriation in making sense of Afghanistan and places like it that are almost but not quite in the throttle-hold of empire.<sup>93</sup> The colonial desire for ‘fixity’ – the rigid casting of the Other as visible and knowable – effectuated through the ideological operation of stereotyping is particularly intense for these quasi-colonial spaces because they retain an element of mystery in the imperial imaginary. They have never been fully captured by the machinations of imperial sense-making because of a lack of dedicated colonial machinery ‘on the ground’ to translate lived experiences, and the need to label, categorise and fix is amplified in these spaces. The text analysed below shows this affective desire for stereotypes to capture the ‘essence’ of Afghanistan in more detail.

### Afghanistan 101

*Afghanistan 101: Understanding Afghan Culture* by Ehsan M. Entezar is a treatise in which Bhabha’s claim that colonial stereotypes cannot be proven and therefore must be repeated – which is the reason for their ambivalence – can be seen brazenly in action.<sup>94</sup> It is also one in which a preoccupation with ‘social science’ as abstraction trumps all other considerations. Dr Entezar, an Afghan graduate of Columbia University, has written an eminently influential book which encapsulates many of the concerns of this chapter. It figures in college curricula,<sup>95</sup> is required reading for many US soldiers and marines deploying to Afghanistan,<sup>96</sup> and is included in the US Navy’s recommended

Suhrke, ‘A Contradictory Mission? NATO from Stabilization to Combat in Afghanistan’, *International Peacekeeping* 15, no. 2 (2008), 214–36; Fazal Haq Saikal and William Maley, ‘With the Afghan Refugees in Pakistan’, *Quadrant* 30, no. 10 (1986), 24; Nancy Roberts, ‘Coping with Wicked Problems: The Case of Afghanistan’, *Research in Public Policy Analysis and Management* 11 (2001), [www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1016/S0732-1317%2801%2911006-7](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1016/S0732-1317%2801%2911006-7) (last accessed 20 February 2020); Kakakhel Niaz A. Shah, ‘Women’s Rights and the New Constitution of Afghanistan’, *International Studies Journal* 1 (2004), 57; and Joel Hafvenstein, *Opium Season: A Year on the Afghan Frontier* (Guildford, CT: Globe Pequot, 2007).

<sup>92</sup> To cite Bhabha once again: ‘Of Mimicry and Man’; see also Bhabha, ‘The Other Question’.

<sup>93</sup> This may be considered to be no longer the case in the age of the American Empire.

<sup>94</sup> Bhabha, ‘The Other Question’.

<sup>95</sup> It is also part of the honours course on ‘Understanding US Foreign Policy toward Afghanistan’ at the University of Maryland, [www.universityhonors.umd.edu/Term1308/269T.php](http://www.universityhonors.umd.edu/Term1308/269T.php) (last accessed 1 June 2017). The reading list for the course also includes Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, a gut-wrenching fictionalised account of the treatment of women in Afghanistan discussed below.

<sup>96</sup> Some syllabi on which it can be found include ‘Tactical Communication Group’ (which provides ‘culture and language’ training to marines deploying to Afghanistan); ‘Military Officers Afghanistan Reading List’ (where it sits beside Ahmed Rashid, David Kilkullen, Greg

pre-deployment reading list.<sup>97</sup> Entezar has given numerous lectures on Afghan culture to US embassy personnel in Kabul, coalition forces and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and his lecture titled 'Afghan Culture and Politics' was mandatory listening for US troops deployed to Afghanistan.<sup>98</sup> Notably, Entezar also features in *A Different Kind of War*, the US Army's comprehensive history of its campaign Operation Enduring Freedom, which was under way in Afghanistan between October 2001 and September 2005.<sup>99</sup>

Borrowing its theoretical framework from the Dutch social psychologist Geert Hostede, *Afghanistan 101* is a pithy primer to Afghan culture that 'explains how and why Afghan culture is so drastically different from American and other Western cultures', 'provides tips on how Westerners can work effectively with Afghans', delineates the 'underlying reasons why Afghans think and behave the way they do', 'describes how Afghans deal with social power, expert power' and various other dimensions of power and authority, 'explains how Afghans cope with fear of nature, of other men and of the supernatural', 'explains why Afghans are loyal first and foremost to their family, and then to their ethnicity, sect, ideology, and region, and only lastly to the state as a whole', 'gives an analysis of gender issues in Afghanistan' and finally 'provides a comprehensive description of the major ethnic groups in Afghanistan'.<sup>100</sup> That the book is successful in accomplishing this arduous task, according to *any* measure, in fewer than 150 pages is in itself a significant achievement.

The glowing reception it has received from its audience is testament both to the popularity of the book and to the way in which Afghanistan is currently being studied and acted upon. A sample of the stellar reviews written on Amazon, mostly by self-identified military and aid workers, gives a clear sense of this. For instance: 'I train military personnel deploying to Afghanistan and have been purchasing this book as part of my curriculum. *It should be required reading for anyone deploying to any tribal society; particularly Afghanistan.* I hope the word is spread about this clear, concise, and informative book.'

Mortenson and Khaled Hosseini), <http://fcw.com/articles/2010/01/11/bookmarks-reading-list-sidebar.aspx> (last accessed 23 December 2019); and *The Joint Multinational Training Command Training Journal* 2, a publication of the Joint Multinational Training Command (Grafenwoehr, Germany, 2010), available at [http://issuu.com/jmtc/docs/jmtc\\_tj\\_2/31](http://issuu.com/jmtc/docs/jmtc_tj_2/31) (last accessed 23 December 2019).

<sup>97</sup> The reading list is available online at [www.public.navy.mil/ia/Documents/AFG\\_Reading\\_List.doc](http://www.public.navy.mil/ia/Documents/AFG_Reading_List.doc) (last accessed 14 March 2019).

<sup>98</sup> Entezar, *Afghanistan 101*, 3.

<sup>99</sup> Donald Wright, ed., *A Different Kind of War: The United States Army in Operation Enduring Freedom, October 2001 to September 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010).

<sup>100</sup> Entezar, *Afghanistan 101*, back cover.

Another reviewer remarks: 'I'm thinking about joining the Peace Corps when I retire from full-time work and go to Afghanistan. I wanted to learn about the culture in the meantime and this is the book to use. It's perfect.'

Yet another eager reviewer writes:

A key to understanding another culture: This should be read by all military personnel and anyone interested in understanding a very different culture on its own terms. It helps you *understand the real differences of US and Afghan culture and how these differences can be understood and bridged*. An important book which benefits from Entezar's long exposure to both cultures as a resident and teacher . . .

Another specifies how important the book has been in, and should be in, shaping perceptions of the 'Afghan way':

Excellent book for people being deployed: I purchased this book when I found out I was on my way to Afghanistan. I wanted to understand the culture and way people think before I got here. I was sent to Afghanistan on a mission to train the Afghan military and police. This book is a must read for anybody in this type of position. It is almost as if this book was written specifically for my mission. I highly recommend this book for anybody interested in *why people are the way they are and how to perceive the Afghan way*.

Apologos of my argument, it is of some consequence that this fulsome appreciation comes mostly from those either deployed or about to be deployed in Afghanistan, for instance: 'I purchased this book for a USMC officer headed to Afghanistan "this time". He really liked the book and has been passing it around to his Marines. I was pleased to learn the USMC cultural training encompassed concepts in the book.' Another review reads:

A thorough, schematic, and readable approach to the culture of Afghanistan: Entezar's book is a delightful introduction, with many contemporary examples, to Afghan culture and its implications for those working with Afghans, or offering programs for Afghans. His experience teaching Afghan language and culture to Peace Corps Volunteers, diplomats, and soldiers makes this book a fascinating read with illustrations that come alive to the reader. It should be read by every policy maker, aid worker and soldier who is preparing to travel and live in Afghanistan. *One cannot understand, assist, and positively influence Afghans without understanding their culture*. A native of Afghanistan, Dr. Entezar returned to his native country and continued his research over the past 30 years. Highly recommended.

The adulatory reviews are specifically complimentary with regard to the practical ingress the book offers to approaching and apprehending Afghanistan for individuals hitherto unfamiliar to the country and its people: 'This is *essential reading for anyone working in Afghanistan*. I wish I had read it before my first assignment there. Well constructed and informative. Recommended.' Finally:

A must read before deploying to Afghanistan: I was called to Kabul Afghanistan last August 2012 in response to the Green on Blue murders of 3 of our Border Management



Task Force contractors. After 26 years in the military I've seen plenty of war torn countries but this trip to Afghanistan sent me on a mission to better understand what was obviously an extraordinarily complex and multifaceted culture. To do this I selected both the excellent history by Thomas Barfield . . . and this more contemporary view of Ehsan M. Entezar. For me it took both books, each unique in their perspective, to capture a satisfactory understanding of the ethnic, religious, tribal and political forces at work in Afghanistan . . . Entezar provides very practical insight into every day Afghan culture and *is the minimum must read for the western visitor*.

An extended book review-cum-policy prescription published in *Foreign Policy* in 2011 uses *Afghanistan 101* to explicate why aid to Afghanistan has failed to attain the desired consequences. The author, Art Keller, argues:

Ehsan Entezar's *Afghanistan 101*, dryly academic though its language tends to be, is nevertheless an illuminating guide to the Afghanistan today [sic]. As a scholar born, raised, and educated in Afghanistan before obtaining his doctorate in the United States, Entezar lends the insight of a native son in illuminating the realities of Afghan culture and society, and by doing so, providing some sharp clues as to the likely efficacy of the aid programs that are allegedly 'building' Afghanistan [sic].<sup>101</sup>

Drawing on Entezar as a source of infallible wisdom about the Afghan psyche, the article claims that 'ethnic strife' and 'sectarian splits' are endemic, that 'rules are followed *only* by common Afghans without access to wealth and education' and that looting and corruption comes naturally to Afghan people, proposing 'turning off the aid trap' as the only viable option. In Keller's words: 'The willingness of Afghan officials to rob the aid community blind should thus not come as a shock . . . but rather something that foreign aid officials who took the time to investigate the currently prevailing social norms and political and economic realities in Afghanistan should have anticipated.'<sup>102</sup>

Similarly, in an article in the *Joint Force Quarterly*, published by the National Defense University, the author Michael Fortune writes of the 'daunting challenges' faced by the coalition and explicitly references Entezar to assert that the 'Afghan culture is not conducive to generating competent, broad-minded leaders'.<sup>103</sup> He goes on to claim that 'while it is probably not possible to completely overhaul the character of these self-serving officials, commanders, and other leaders in [a] dramatic way . . . it still may be feasible to influence the ways these leaders think and operate at a fundamental level'. It thus behoves the coalition to make the Afghans adopt a 'more altruistic,

<sup>101</sup> Art Keller, 'Ailing Aid: Afghanistan', *Foreign Policy*, 25 February 2011; emphasis added.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Michael Fortune, 'The Real Key to Success in Afghanistan: Overlooked, Underrated, Forgotten or Just Too Hard?', *Joint Force Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2012), 12, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-65.pdf> (last accessed 23 December 2019).

passionate, and caring mindset that extends beyond family, tribe, and ethnicity' and 'transform their habit of mind'.<sup>104</sup>

In light of the above commendation, it is patently evident but nonetheless worth belabouring that this book is read, digested and circulated among people working in Afghanistan and with Afghans. Therefore the fact that this text is widely understood to be providing a window into an 'extraordinarily complex' culture and that the author has been credited with explicating and disseminating deep truths about the way in which 'Afghan culture works' is one that needs to be engaged with.<sup>105</sup>

Before launching into a critique of the text itself, some context regarding the scholarly and personal credentials of Ehsan Entezar is apposite. Much of the legitimacy of the book is derived from Entezar's Afghan background and ethnicity, with the tacit understanding that as a person of Afghan origin he must have access to some profound secret knowledge about the country. As it happens, Entezar's work is instead largely based on anecdotal evidence with little sustained fieldwork. He appears to have lived in the USA for most of his adult life, having left Afghanistan well before the Taliban came to power. Although he mentions returning to Kabul in 2002 in order to undertake the fieldwork needed for the book, he himself proclaims on multiple occasions in the text that much of what he has argued is based on an 'intuitive understanding' of the 'Afghan culture'. The text is bestrewn with references to his life in the country many decades back, and those limited personal experiences are relied upon to make generalisations about an entire people.

A more generous reading of Entezar, one that avoids the pitfalls of falling into a nativist politics of authenticity, could be through the lens of the 'native informant'. The native informant is a stock figure and a deeply recognisable trope in the colonial archive. Conventionally used in ethnography to describe indigenous people who provide information about non-Western societies to Western anthropologists,<sup>106</sup> the category has been developed by post-colonial critics to signal a collaborationist identity that can be interpellated only in and by the West.<sup>107</sup> These native informants deploy their knowledge in ways that

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> More glowing reviews can be found at [www.amazon.com/Afghanistan-101-Understanding-Afghan-Culture/product-reviews/1425792820/ref=cm\\_cr\\_pr\\_btm\\_link\\_1?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=0&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending](https://www.amazon.com/Afghanistan-101-Understanding-Afghan-Culture/product-reviews/1425792820/ref=cm_cr_pr_btm_link_1?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=0&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending) (emphasis added in the quotation above) and [www.barnesandnoble.com/w/afghanistan-101-ehsan-m-entezar/1100385227](https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/afghanistan-101-ehsan-m-entezar/1100385227). Slightly more critical reviews can be accessed on [goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com), although the object of critique is more often than not the structure and the language as opposed to the content: [www.goodreads.com/book/show/3443269-afghanistan-101](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/3443269-afghanistan-101) (both last accessed 27 May 2017).

<sup>106</sup> See Morton H. Fried, 'The Myth of Tribe', *Natural History* 84, no. 4 (1975), 12–20.

<sup>107</sup> The 'native informant' has been developed in various ways in post-colonial scholarship. For Bhabha, the native informant is a mimic man who is potentially Janus-faced and can end up being menacing and subversive. For Massad, he is a more straightforwardly jaundiced man,

dovetail with imperial agendas from which they benefit as 'middlemen' or intermediaries between imperial power and its native subjects. Conversely, imperial powers tend to turn to the kinds of native informants who can say what they want to hear the loudest. This was also a premeditated colonial strategy to produce hybrid subjects, as explicated in Thomas Babington Macaulay's (in)famous minute on Indian education. In his own words, Britain was to produce a new 'class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect'.<sup>108</sup> These new citizens would serve a dual purpose for empire: they would infuse local dialects with Western ideologies as well as provide colonial authorities with 'inside' knowledge of the societies they wish to govern.

Entezar inhabits this schema effortlessly, marketing his book to his Western audiences as a much-needed corrective to the existing literature in the field which 'deals with Afghan culture superficially and unsystematically'.<sup>109</sup> He postulates that his is among the 'first attempt[s] to analyze Afghan national culture systematically', claiming: '[a]t best, the existing literature on Afghan culture deals with what I call the *surface structure* of the Afghan national culture. It provides little information on cultural patterns (deep structure)'.<sup>110</sup> The starting premise, therefore, is that *Afghanistan 101* offers the reader a *thick* interpretation of Afghan society and culture, setting it apart from the thin, simplistic analyses that are the norm in the field. The final outcome is so far removed from this original intention that it serves as a poignant reminder about the current state of the field vis-à-vis knowledge production about Afghanistan.

*Afghanistan 101: Understanding Afghan Culture* reinforces most prejudices about Afghanistan and perpetuates a rather contorted understanding of the country and the people. A large photograph of a veiled woman adorns the book's front cover, and the book is dedicated to 'the widows and orphans of Afghanistan'. The imagery and choice of words, while not particularly imaginative, are certainly revealing. Afghanistan is immediately represented as a country of orphans, widows and veiled women – subject positions associated with vulnerability and the need for protection. The 'woman question' always looms large in analyses of Afghanistan, and texts such as these serve to feminise the entire country as a hapless victim, limiting the range of

and for Spivak he is a metropolitan hybrid, a figure that can be tracked from Kant to Hegel to Marx. See Homi K. Bhabha, 'The World and the Home', *Cultural Politics* 11 (1997), 445–55; Joseph Massad, 'Re-orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World', *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (2002), 361–85, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>108</sup> Macaulay, Thomas Babington. 'Minute on Indian Education' (1835), 236. Thomas Babington Macaulay Selected Writings (1972): 235–51.

<sup>109</sup> Entezar, *Afghanistan 101*, 15. <sup>110</sup> Ibid., 10; emphasis in original.

viable policy options for those interested in finding a solution to the problems plaguing the region. Indeed, there is a noticeable slippage between calls to liberate Afghanistan as the land of oppressed women and Afghanistan personified as an oppressed woman that is begging to be conquered.<sup>111</sup>

Since Entezar's book is principally a comparison between Afghan and American 'culture', the latter is subject to a comparable degree of reification, a sound example of the way in which the coloniser and the colonised are co-constituted through practices of stereotyping. In keeping with the Orientalist conceit of the Manichean division of the world into 'good' and 'evil', *Afghanistan 101* uncritically essentialises both the West and Afghanistan in a manner that is shockingly facile thirty years after the publication of Said's *Orientalism* and the literature it has inspired. As Entezar pits the USA (and the West more generally) against Afghanistan (and the wider Muslim world) and contrasts them against five metrics, some degree of abstraction can, of course, be expected. At times, however, the 'Self' and 'Other'<sup>112</sup> or 'us and them' framework is bafflingly simplistic and presented without a trace of evidence. For instance, the claim that 'there is more often a gap between desired and desirable behavior in Afghanistan than there is in the United States',<sup>113</sup> while doing no conceptual or explanatory work, does serve a purpose in implicitly advocating a refashioning of the Afghan subject. The Afghan man is unable to conduct himself in a way that makes his words correspond to his actions.<sup>114</sup> Americans, on the other hand, have their thoughts and actions better aligned and could, presumably, impart this wisdom to their Afghan counterparts. To take one example from the text:

[i]n the family, the father is the absolute power. He must be obeyed, and his ideas and decisions cannot be challenged. He makes decisions for his family members in marriage, education, and other aspects of life. Disobedience is punished, ranging from verbal abuse to physical punishment to divorce in the case of the wife and disowning in the case of children. Some husbands establish their authority in the early days of their marriage by scaring and intimidating their wives. It is said that a powerful husband should kill a cat (or 'cat killing') on the first night of the wedding to teach his wife a lesson. This may seem cruel to a Westerner, but Afghans do not like dogs or cats.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>111</sup> A point I explore in greater depth in Chapter 4.

<sup>112</sup> Entezar's position as a native informer allows him to straddle both worlds. For some this 'insider' status immunises him against charges of racism. On the contrary, I would submit that Entezar and others like him are but a manifestation of the extent to which Orientalist and racist categories of thought have been internalised in the academy and in politics at large: cf. Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 5–6.

<sup>113</sup> Entezar, *Afghanistan 101*, 18.

<sup>114</sup> Curiously enough, Entezar's interlocutors and subjects are overwhelmingly male. Women remain in the backdrop, needing to be saved.

<sup>115</sup> Entezar, *Afghanistan 101*, 32.

While these gross generalisations appear a tad contrived, even fanciful, it is precisely an over-reliance on proclamations such as this that makes Afghanistan accepted as a perverse land of anachronistic customs and outlandish people. The mainstreaming of Afghanistan as 'no country for women' can be traced back to statements of this sort, rather than attributed to the particular policies of an ultra-orthodox regime. Claims of this ilk are also instrumental in effectively precluding any substantive engagement with Afghan history, society or politics and therefore paradoxically contribute to the vacuum of knowledge in which 'Afghanistan' finds itself.

The conclusion of Entezar's first chapter, '[i]n summary, Afghanistan is a high power distance society where social power is coercive, expert power is nonexistent, decision making is autocratic and consultative, power cannot be separated from wealth, elitism is dominant, age and charisma are respected, and the Afghans respect the authority of the person rather than of the rules', is revealing. Having argued that Afghans value wealth excessively,<sup>116</sup> and that they do not have a tendency to follow rules, Entezar lays out the implications of his analysis. It is worth quoting him at length:

One is that persuasion alone is not enough to get anything done without using force as a last resort. Another is that unless proper measures are taken, funds for reconstruction could be misdirected, and abused; the close union of power and wealth leads to corruption in the government, especially at the highest levels. Finally, in the Afghan national culture inequality is defined from below, not from above, suggesting that the level of inequality in Afghan society is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders. That is why when the ruler or administrator is weak, people tend to disrespect him and/or disobey the laws, rules and regulations, leading to lawlessness and chaos and even the creation of multiple centers of power. Thus, it is crucial to appoint mature, competent, and strong personalities in the government at all levels, especially in the security forces. It is important to keep in mind that in Afghan culture ... [it] is the authority of the ruler rather than the authority of the rule that counts.<sup>117</sup>

Apart from the banalities (it is arguably 'crucial' to appoint 'competent' people for any position) and the unapologetic essentialism, the principal take-away for those operating in Afghanistan that emerges from the paragraph above is that Afghans are prone to corruption and need to be subject to a ruler who is not afraid to use force. The problem emerges when recommendations such as these are digested without much thought and policies become based on them. The very palpable problem of corruption in Afghanistan, and many countries besides, becomes one of the facets of its 'culture' rather than, for

<sup>116</sup> A comment like this has a macabre quality given the unparalleled degree of Afghan poverty. Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$596.30 in 2013, which is equivalent to a meagre 3 per cent of the world average: [www.tradingeconomics.com/afghanistan/gdp-per-capita](http://www.tradingeconomics.com/afghanistan/gdp-per-capita) (last accessed 17 August 2017).

<sup>117</sup> Entezar, *Afghanistan* 101, 46.

example, a manifestation of the skewed system of pay and rewards and the concentration of political power and monetary wealth in the hands of an unrepresentative elite. Not only does this lead to a fundamental defeatism about the prospects for change, but it feeds into self-serving mechanisms, and serves as a justification for complacent policies established by Afghanistan's international donors. Norway's announcement in 2013 that it would cut aid in order to signal to Kabul 'that it has not done enough to combat corruption and violence against women' can be read as one instantiation of the ways in which recommendations such as the above can be problematic and follow directly from the policy prescriptions espoused in *Foreign Policy* articles of the sort cited earlier.<sup>118</sup> Under the Trump administration in 2019, the USA cut aid to Afghanistan by \$100 million, citing corruption.<sup>119</sup> Without wishing to give more importance to this book than is due, I would claim that the suggestions imparted to Americans and other Westerners working in Afghanistan and with Afghans are symptomatic of a partial, haphazard and ultimately specious engagement with the multifarious cultures, histories, political universes and lifeways of the Afghan people. Therefore, while *Afghanistan 101* has not set the terms of engagement, it is part of the larger, hegemonic discourse, making it all the more insidious and resistant to change. The paragraphs above are remarkably reminiscent of (if more simplistic than) old colonial texts on Afghanistan. The idea that Afghans do not understand persuasion but must be met with force is an abiding theme of the British encounter with Afghanistan in the nineteenth century. John William Kaye wrote in 1858: '[r]igour is inseparable from the government of such a people. We cannot rein wild horses with silken braids.'<sup>120</sup> General Charles Macgregor, the chief of staff of the British military in Kabul about two decades later in 1879, who also suggested that force was the only thing that the Afghans understood, would be less delicate in his prose with regard to the course of action needed to 'bring them to their senses' when he imperiously announced to the reigning Afghan leader Sher Ali Khan:

<sup>118</sup> [www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/04/us-norway-afghanistan-idUSBRE9930L920131004](https://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/04/us-norway-afghanistan-idUSBRE9930L920131004) (last accessed 4 November 2018); this is befitting of the recommendations of Keller's *Foreign Policy* article 'Ailing Aid', cited above.

<sup>119</sup> Lara Jakes, 'U.S. Cuts \$100 Million in Aid to Afghanistan Citing Government Corruption', *New York Times*, 23 September 2019, [www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/world/asia/us-afghanistan-aid.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/world/asia/us-afghanistan-aid.html) (last accessed 23 September 2019).

<sup>120</sup> John William Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1874). Kaye claimed that Dost Mohammad 'often resorted, for the due maintenance of his power, to measures of severity incompatible with the character of a humane ruler' (vol. 2, 123). This is not much different from what Entezar is arguing in the twenty-first century. The obvious interpretation would be that Afghans have really not 'progressed' since the 1800s. A more radical rereading would posit that the justification of empire remains the same a century and a half later.

You shall give in, you have killed Cavi [the British envoy in Kabul] and his hundred men, but we are sending another representative with 10,000 men, and he shall stay there whether you like it or not. We wish one thing from you and that is friendship, but whether we get this or not, we will have your obedience, you may chafe as much as you please, but we will be your masters and you will find that the only escape from our heavy hand will be your entire submission.<sup>121</sup>

Entezar in his role as native informant seems to have replicated, almost verbatim, the sentiments of the British in Afghanistan at the height of empire. This may be one reason why American servicemen and servicewomen find that the book is easily digestible and speaks to their concerns about 'Afghan culture'. Alternatively, the trope of the intrepid Afghan warrior who understands nothing other than brute force has been internalised to such an extent that Entezar appears to be saying not much at all. In any event, the text is littered with comparisons and statements that occasionally read like parodies but are entirely sincere, and are received as such by their target audience. A few examples include 'Americans . . . are more adventurous than Afghans because the former are more tolerant of uncertainty than the latter'<sup>122</sup> and 'Americans are taught to manage their anger. This explains why Afghans get mad and yell in public and in private more than the Americans, the British and other Western societies.'<sup>123</sup> Entezar is subtly inuring his Western interlocutors to the lives of the Other.<sup>124</sup> However, although this project is clearly not the result of any sustained academic research – the thin evidentiary base on which he builds his comparisons is testament to that – it does fit the conventional wisdom and is therefore accepted at face value rather than questioned as one man's perception and experience of one or two nations. In the context of the 'nation-building' projects that had been undertaken in Afghanistan, the information Entezar imparts to his interlocutors working in the country cannot be dismissed as biased, lacking nuance and hence of little value. On the contrary, the personal anecdotes, accessible language and easy prose devoid of arcane theory make *Afghanistan 101* a readable, handy and undemanding 'guide' to the country: precisely what it is intended to be.

The step-by-step illustration of the differences between Afghans and Americans also appeals to those preparing to go and encounter a foreign land for the first time. A case in point is the paragraph below:

<sup>121</sup> Quoted in Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 142. <sup>122</sup> Entezar, *Afghanistan 101*, 49. <sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>124</sup> He continues, possibly with the intention of not being too harsh on the Afghans: 'This may seem uncivilized, but it is good for the heart if individuals can express their emotions and get it off their chest. There have not been any studies of Afghan Americans, but according to some studies Japanese Americans suffer more from heart disease than the Japanese because the Japanese society allows its members to express their emotions.' *Ibid.*, 50–1.



Afghans, unlike Americans, fear the government. Afghans fear lack of food (quantity), whereas Americans worry about eating less and avoiding unhealthy food (quality). Afghans eat to live while Americans live to eat. Afghans worry more about basic human needs; Americans worry more about individual freedoms and rights. Afghans worry about not just immediate family but also extended family. If Afghans pay more attention to the present rather than the future, Americans pay attention not just to the present but also the future (planning and saving money). Afghans usually accept their parents' decisions and stay with them until they pass away while Americans often do not. Finally, Afghans worry about their children even after they are grown up, but Americans often do not.<sup>125</sup>

We see here the Afghans 'coming into the world', as it were. They are imagined, conjured up, and produced as the 'regular constellation of ideas' that marks them and sets them apart as distinctively Afghan.<sup>126</sup> Work such as this, devoid of fine-grained theoretical analyses of the subject at hand or of sedulous ethnographic research, is exactly reflective of the production of knowledge with reference to Afghanistan in the social sciences today. Admittedly, Entezar is a purveyor of Orientalist tropes in a manner that few academics worthy of the name are. However, these very Orientalist tropes, some less self-conscious than others, form the basis of our knowledge about Afghanistan. This is the legacy of multiple decades of a limited and sporadic engagement with the country; through this dominant discourse Afghanistan is conceived of and understood as a buffer in the Great Game, as a space between two meaningful entities, and as fully coming 'of age' in the popular imaginary only in the War on Terror. Much of the knowledge about the country remains dependent on texts written during one of those periods – the late nineteenth century and the early twenty-first century – when Afghanistan was in the spotlight. The exigent demands for 'immediate' and 'accessible' knowledge against the backdrop of an intervention gone sour have compounded the problem. And in an academic world – especially but not solely in Britain – increasingly governed by 'impact factors' and tangible 'real-world' implications of research, the appeal of disseminating ever more common-sensical knowledge is only likely to become greater.<sup>127</sup> The value of Entezar's work lies in his bold attempts at making his work immediately policy-relevant by making the Afghans as 'legible' as possible.<sup>128</sup>

The examples he gives all confirm our biases, thereby making his recommendations easier to implement. It has now been drilled into most students of Afghanistan that it is a tribal country with different ethnicities and loyalties.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 69. <sup>126</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 5.

<sup>127</sup> This is not a call for academics to shun all existence outside of their so-called ivory towers. It is merely an acknowledgement of the gradual corporatisation of the academy, especially in Britain, given the demand on scholars to make their world 'policy-relevant'.

<sup>128</sup> To evoke James Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998) once again.

Entezar uses this 'general knowledge' about Afghanistan and juxtaposes it with claims about America that are homologous (in structure, not content), perfectly performing the dual purpose of his native informant status à la Lord Macaulay. This packaging of information in a manner that chimes with conventional wisdom contributes to the book's mass appeal.<sup>129</sup>

Afghans become aware of their ancestry at an early age. By the age of seven, a child knows whether he is Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara . . . Ethnic groups differ in the way they speak, dress, eat, pray, and even where they bury their dead. *Ethnic awareness early on is critical for survival in countries such as Afghanistan*. One's ethnicity affects employment, education, marriage, social status, security, and other aspects of life in the country. In the West, on the other hand, ethnic identity is not so important . . . Ethnicity in the West has very little, if any, relevancy in employment, education, and other aspects of life because advancement and promotions are based on merits and qualifications. Neither does ethnicity have bearing when it comes to law reinforcement.<sup>130</sup>

Comments such as these can be internalised superficially by those going to Afghanistan and needing to learn about 'it' as fast as possible. They also reassert the supremacy of those in power, even though the statement about ethnicity or race having no relevance in the West is as contentious as the statement that attentiveness to one's ethnicity and those of others is crucial for survival in Afghanistan. Indeed, studies on incarceration policies in the USA and hiring practices in the UK all point to pronounced and sustained prejudices against people of colour and minoritised communities. By lulling his reader into a state of complacent superiority at every opportunity, Entezar re-inscribes the logics of Orientalism in a manner that appears almost farcical. The sentence below proves exemplary in this regard:

Language is related to ethnicity and is a sensitive issue in Afghanistan. Unlike the West, where it is a means of communication and the key to learning, in Afghanistan people identify with language and use it as a tool for domination. Since Afghans identify with language, an attack on one's language is tantamount to an attack on the people who speak it.<sup>131</sup>

Julietta Singh has plotted the violent history of linguistic mastery by Britain and France in their former colonies so methodically that the notion that language is not intimately tied to the wielding of power in and by the West is now fatuous, but that is not our major concern here.<sup>132</sup> Instead, it is the dualistic construction of language – as a tool of domination in some places and

<sup>129</sup> The way information is packaged is in itself a key tool of empire. See Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), and also Anson and Barkawi, 'Utile Forms'.

<sup>130</sup> Entezar, *Afghanistan 101*, 81; emphasis added. <sup>131</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>132</sup> Julietta Singh, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

a means of communication in others – that once again diverts attention from the casuistic logic of the statement to the familiar land of Self and Other, where everything that we are, they are not. By choosing examples that are recognisable given their prominence in other questionable knowledge-generating outlets such as the right-wing press in the USA and Britain, *Afghanistan 101* becomes a mechanistic reassertion of everything we think we know about Afghanistan. Afghanistan crystallises into the country of domination, oppression, ethnic hatred and ancient customs.

No book on Afghanistan, especially of this genre, would be complete without a mention of the role, or lack thereof, of women in the country. *Afghanistan 101* portrays a bleak picture of the place, making blanket generalisations about the innate proclivity of ‘Afghan culture’ to be cruel to women and for women to be treated inhumanely:

In Afghan culture, women are treated as property. In some parts of the country, women are sold as cattle. One of Khaled Hosseini’s characters in his recent novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, compares his wives with cars, calling the one he likes a Mercedes Benz and the one he dislikes a Russian Volga. It is worth noting in this connection that this novel gives an excellent portrayal of life for Afghan women in society.<sup>133</sup>

This tirade against the misogyny of ‘Afghan culture’ is followed by customary fulminations against the Taliban and the practices of veiling in Afghanistan. As an aside, it is pertinent to note that Hosseini himself is not only widely acclaimed as a novelist but also recommended in many syllabi and widely extolled as an Afghan expert in the West.<sup>134</sup> He has been subject to much censure in Afghanistan for claiming to speak for the Afghan people while being divorced from Afghan ‘reality’ and ‘lived experience’, having left the country at the age of five and never having learned the language(s).<sup>135</sup>

It is perhaps unsurprising that a short monograph entitled *Afghanistan 101* whose author claims to possess the secret to ‘Afghan culture’ does not amount to a rigorous scholarly enterprise. However, even if we were to forgive the shortcomings of the text itself, the more problematic trends that the book heralds remain acute. In the first instance, the popularity of the book is an instantiation of a wider phenomenon that afflicts the study of Afghanistan, namely our reliance on the belief that the ‘key’ to Afghanistan is its ‘culture’.

<sup>133</sup> *Afghanistan 101*, 89.

<sup>134</sup> For instance, it appears alongside *Afghanistan 101* as one of the five essential texts on the University of Maryland’s honours course ‘Understanding U.S. Foreign Policy towards Afghanistan’.

<sup>135</sup> Moreover, Hosseini’s work is largely based on emotive stereotyping and sophistry, as argued cogently by Janette Edwards in ‘Expatriate Literature and the Problem of Contested Representation: The Case of Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*’, *interdisciplinary.net*, [www.interdisciplinary.net/ati/diversity/multiculturalism/mcb2/edwards%20paper.pdf](http://www.interdisciplinary.net/ati/diversity/multiculturalism/mcb2/edwards%20paper.pdf) (last accessed 13 March 2019).

'Culture' has increasingly become a stigmatising catch-all phrase for all kinds of social, political and economic formations, identities and affiliations found in the Global South.<sup>136</sup> In other words, 'culture' is now used as a metonym for difference, for propping up old distinctions between 'us' and 'them', couched in a sanitised and seemingly disinterested vocabulary and, most damagingly, as a self-justified amnesty from any meaningful engagement or dialogue with those bracketed off as belonging to 'another culture'. The recourse to cultural differences is now a popular strategy for exculpation from the failures of intervention in Afghanistan, and studies such as Entezar's only serve to bolster the myth of the 'alienness' of Afghan life. Indeed, how many other countries do we study in this cursory and limited manner? Is there an equivalent '101' for the USA or Britain that is given to foreign troops deployed in the country as 'essential reading' or to university students? Can an author realistically write a book titled 'America 101' and be widely credited with having access to some deep truths about the land and its people that are not openly available to others through a rare prerogative granted on the basis of having lived in the country a few decades ago?<sup>137</sup> Only in the context of the epistemological production of Afghanistan as a vacuum can this book be recommended as a credible source of information on the country. However, a reliance on hollow and impoverished signifiers continues to shape much if not most analysis on the country. Continuing this trend, a report by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit ventures: 'Afghan society is elitist at its core, populist in its aura, and misogynist in its heart, where women are secondary citizens, always one of four: someone's daughter, sister, wife or mother.'<sup>138</sup> Barfield too can be summoned as evidence once more when he argues:

Few peoples in the world, particularly in the Islamic world, have maintained such an unproblematic sense of themselves, their culture, and their superiority as the Afghans. In abstract terms all foreigners, especially non-Muslims, are viewed as inferior to Afghans. Although the great powers might have been militarily, technologically, and economically stronger, because they were non believers, or infidels, their values and way of life were naturally suspect. Afghanistan's Muslim neighbors, however, fared only slightly better in (Sunni) Afghan eyes. The Uzbeks must have been asleep to allow

<sup>136</sup> On culture as a racialised and expedient tool, especially in the social scientific arsenal of those involved in the Human Terrain System, see Derek Gregory, 'Dis/ordering the Orient: Scopic Regimes and Modern War', in Tarak Barkawi and Keith Stanski, eds., *Orientalism and War* (London: Hurst & Co., 2012), 151–76. On the problematic application of 'cultural lenses' specifically in the Afghan context in the War on Terror, see Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes* (London: Hurst & Co., 2009).

<sup>137</sup> The appellation 'America' would itself be fraught, but it is used by residents of the USA and the wider world.

<sup>138</sup> Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, *The Dilemma of Women and Leadership in Afghanistan: Lessons and Recommendations*, 2014, <https://areu.org.af/archives/publication/1425> (last accessed 14 March 2019).

the Russians to occupy central Asia for more than a century; Pakistan is a suspect land of recent Muslim converts from Hinduism (Pashtuns and Baluch excepted) that never should have become a nation; and Iran is a nest of Shiite heretics who speak Persian with a ludicrous accent.<sup>139</sup>

This is a rather tall claim to make given competing evidence about Afghanistan's relatively recent entry into the world as a holistic and unified 'imagined community'. It is also suspect given that 'Afghans' also include Uzbeks, Turkmen and Tajiks and have contesting notions of 'nation' and nationality, a fact that is completely papered over in this representation of Afghans as exceptionally narcissistic. Perhaps Barfield is referring only to the Pashtun population of Afghanistan? Aside from that, it is rather demonstrative that Barfield's text is venerated as a tour de force and cited as the definitive text on Afghanistan. This 'anthropological' text is bereft of any ethnography, uses no language sources, leans heavily on secondary political science texts to make its core arguments and displays a shockingly poor grasp of the regional and linguistic make-up of the country.

In sum, if the Orientalists that Said attacks saw Islam as a 'cultural synthesis' that 'could be studied apart from the economics, sociology, and politics of Islamic peoples',<sup>140</sup> others have taken this ahistoricism and essentialism one step further. Entezar's work comes off as top candidate in this race for cultural reductionism, in which not only is 'Afghan culture' unyoked from the overlapping and interdependent categories of society, politics and economics, but it is an entirely timeless entity – 'the software of the mind'<sup>141</sup> – that, when comprehended correctly, is instrumental in being able to '*predict* human behavior'.<sup>142</sup> Culture, then, is the grid of intelligibility that sets one group of (usually geographically bound) people apart from another and enables researchers to predict and contrast the behaviour(s) of these distinct groups. Culture is shorn of all its complexity and contestation both as a category of thought and as an object of study.<sup>143</sup> What makes *Afghanistan 101* especially powerful, and therefore dangerous, is not the 'common-sense' knowledge it exudes about Afghan society but its reception and dissemination in the context of the intervention under way in Afghanistan. Ideas, narratives and discourses

<sup>139</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 42. <sup>140</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 11.

<sup>141</sup> Entezar, *Afghanistan 101*, 17; Entezar borrows this from Hofstede's definition of culture, which is based on a computing metaphor: 'culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes one human group from another' (quoted in *Afghanistan 101*, 19).

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 19; emphasis added.

<sup>143</sup> The distinction is borrowed from Raymond Williams's definition and historicisation of culture as a category in terms of which modern scholars treat 'a people' and its emergence as an object of study for anthropology, archaeology, historiography and, more recently, cultural studies. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 87–93. See also Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 2–3.

are not passive descriptions and 'empty rhetoric'. They are deeply implicated in, and constitutive of, the social realities they describe, and when they are 'mainstreamed' in the way those contained in *Afghanistan 101* have been, they make for a particularly compelling and dangerous justification for certain types of racialised policies and interventions.<sup>144</sup>

### Conclusion

Some peoples and traditions are only ever viewed as instrumental objects of enquiry, sometimes of marvel and at other times of disdain. That these traditions may present genuine frameworks of knowledge in their own right, and that these 'cultures' are themselves the products of tangled histories, imperial encounters and colonial legacies that often have ramifications that are contradictory and ambivalent for all actors concerned, is a possibility that few studies of Afghanistan entertain. This chapter has sought to show the muted racism at the heart of the work currently published and promulgated by 'Afghan experts'. The recognition that we need to unpack the understanding of culture as merely something that sets 'them' apart from 'us', with all the concomitant notions of superiority, hierarchy and asymmetry that underpin this conception of culture, would be the first step towards truly decolonising the production of knowledge.

The abundance of rhetorical strategies and analogies – metaphors, metonymy, tropes, similes, etc. – used when speaking and writing of Afghanistan is noteworthy in its promulgation of Afghanistan's image as a mystical and unfathomable land, putatively intelligible only through equal invocation of fact and fiction, histrionics and history. As Charles Mills has argued in another context, we can see in Anglophone representations of Afghanistan a set of interlocking cognitive processes at work that operate at multiple and sometimes competing levels of overt and tacit background and foreground belief: Eurocentric norming, the development of specific conceptual repertoires and the formulation of theories whose pooled outcome is the erasure of histories and knowledges that do not comply with the stories being narrated.<sup>145</sup> As I have shown here, this 'idea' of 'Afghanistan' – alternately produced as wild, sickly and benighted – is a curated, if polysemous and chaotic one. It stems from an entrenched colonial anxiety to make sense of Afghanistan, a slippery task, aggravated by a history of lackadaisical interest in the country.

<sup>144</sup> The archetypal example of this is NATO soldiers urinating on the bodies of the Taliban, only to be later criticised for 'cultural insensitivity'.

<sup>145</sup> Charles Mills, 'Unwriting and Unwhitening the World', in Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda and Robbie Shilliam, eds., *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (London: Routledge, 2014), 202–14.

Against this backdrop, the authors examined above fall short even of the criteria by which we judge ‘native informants’. Native informers in colonial contexts are deeply embedded observers of, and participants in their own cultures and societies. In the case of Afghanistan, we see a double injustice – the native informants have themselves fled the country decades before they parlay their childhood memories into scientific expertise, giving their opinions and interpretations from afar. Afghanistan’s quasi-coloniality lends a voyeuristic element to the very ‘cultural translators’ the Anglophone West has come to rely on. There exists a humbler class of native informants who are in their own way central to the project of imagining Afghanistan but are not prominent writers and novelists like Entezar and Hosseini. These include translators and other ‘culture workers’ whose local proficiency has been vital for the functioning – and less frequently the disruption – of the colonial project. Yet this diverse cast of characters who would also travel under the sign of ‘native informant’ are sidelined from processes of hegemonic knowledge production because of their financial vulnerability and, ultimately, their disposability. In 2018 Britain announced the deportation of 150 Afghan interpreters working for the British Army, who had initially been given sanctuary in the UK, unless they each paid £2,400 to the Home Office – a sum most of them could not afford.<sup>146</sup>

Afghanistan’s precarity in the global arena is reflected in the ways in which knowledge is produced about it, but is also mirrored by that segment of its population that is crucial to the production of a certain type of knowledge, knowledge which is usually subjugated or dismissed. The next chapter digs deeper into the liminality of the Afghan state, and into (the possibility and promise of) subjugated knowledges.

<sup>146</sup> Ewen MacAskill, ‘Afghan Interpreters Working for UK Army “Failed” by Government’, *Guardian*, 26 May 2018, [www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/may/26/afghan-interpreters-uk-army-failed-british-government-commons-report](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/may/26/afghan-interpreters-uk-army-failed-british-government-commons-report) (last accessed 5 February 2019).