


EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

AFGHANISTAN: THE DEEP STRUCTURE OF A COMPLEX AND ADVERSE MOMENT

The war in Afghanistan is now the longest in U. S. history. Despite mounting opposition, many progressive activists are troubled by the issues in this conflict: unlike in Vietnam, for example, the “enemy” in Afghanistan is a fanatical, terrorist, religious sect that would impose ultra-authoritarian rule, enslave women, destroy knowledge and learning, and erase all hope of a modern life. If we oppose the U. S. presence in that country, it is easy to ask, what are we supporting? At a time when popular democratic revolts are threatening dictatorships throughout North Africa and the Middle East (an “1848” moment?), it may be useful to sketch a Marxist analysis of the Afghan situation.

We may begin with the standard two-agent model. In this, dominant, view, the Afghanistan War is a struggle between the Forces of Darkness (Taliban, warlords) and the Forces of Light (the U. S.–led coalition promoting markets, democracy, secularism and progress). This picture immediately presents an enormous problem: how to explain the stalemate in the war? Why are “we” (the United States) bogged down in a seemingly interminable conflict? Even given the role of cultural drag, the Afghan people surely must want to kick out their oppressors and side with the purveyors of material progress and personal freedom? This is, truly, an unsolvable enigma.

Unless — we replace the two-agent model with a three-agent one.

But first, some background. Throughout its history, and well into the 20th century, Afghanistan has been a multiform precapitalist social formation. Production is carried out by a traditional and quasi-nomadic peasantry, and a merchant–handicraft sector, saddled with landlords and a surplus-extracting military caste, all held together (to the extent possible, given the intense localism and the many conflicts among diverse rulers and factions) by a weak monarchy. Like most regions in the world not fully penetrated by capitalism, Afghanistan was (and is) a patchwork of ethnicities and linguistic variety, with the Pashtun people dominant in the south of the country, and a

mix of Kirghiz, Uzbek, Tadzhik and other peoples in the north (the cultural base of the present-day Northern Alliance). In the 19th century, British and Russian imperialisms carved out the current artificial territorial entity that is Afghanistan; neither ever succeeded fully in subduing the indigenous peoples there.

From 1921 to 1973, this tumultuous but essentially static formation coexisted peacefully with the Soviet Union. Soviet national policy created fixed-territory republics in what became Soviet Central Asia, and the balance sheet on that remains to be fully drawn. However, once a Friendship Treaty was signed between the USSR and Afghanistan in 1921, a border defined and diplomatic relations established, there ensued five decades without border conflicts, economic domination, or "imperial" pressure from the north. In 1973, the king, Zahir Shah, was deposed, perhaps as a result of internal decay within the ruling bureaucracy, difficulties resulting from the aging and evolution of key personnel, and political pressure stemming from the geopolitical example of the more dynamic and developing Central Asian Soviet republics.

Into the ensuing vacuum came a genuinely secular and developmental regime, the governments of Babrak Karmal and Noor Mohammad Taraki, successive leaders of the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The PDPA was formed in 1965, and came to power in April 1978. This regime (as so often in these situations; witness Portugal a few years earlier), was to the left of the country's true political center of gravity. In the absence of outside intervention, that center would have emerged in the form of a modernizing coalition, embracing a state-inflected capitalism whose social character would have been a constant source of contention. The PDPA program: building schools, laying down roads, installing modern water and sewage systems and power grids, creating a network of medical clinics, addressing age-old oppressions (especially of women), developing local government institutions, and in general promoting the infrastructure of a modern society. The all-important social base of this *people's democracy* was the working-class and professional strata, a small but significant minority of the Afghan population: teachers, health-care workers, trade unionists, professionals, women (the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women was a remarkable, and heroic, movement, whose full story is yet to be told). It should go without saying that socialism — in the sense of comprehensive planning and institutionalized working-class participation in economic and social management — was, to borrow an old phrase, "not on the agenda."

Now, the U. S. foreign policy establishment must surely know that, to effectively ground their military efforts, they must seek alliances with these forces — with anyone among whom the idea of secular, democratic government can take root. So: why hasn't the "Western" coalition sought out this

base, its natural ally? There are, I think, two answers. First, the social base in question is in exile! It is driving taxicabs in London, Paris and New York, and living on the margins in the informal economies of neighboring countries. There are hundreds of thousands of Afghan expatriates, who would return to their country in a heartbeat if conditions made their survival, let alone their ability to function normally, likely. They left in the early 1980s and later, escaping from the terror imposed by CIA-funded mujahideen, the forerunners of the Taliban.¹ Those who remained or who have returned are marginalized and kept at arm's length by the U. S. forces and their client regime.

The current rise of Islamic (and other) religious fundamentalisms around the world is, at bottom, a response to the declining influence of both capitalism and socialism. The socialist orientation of the Soviet Union was a major factor in the 20th century, and the key nightmare of international capitalist ruling circles. When the USSR collapsed under the weight of authoritarian deformation, a gap arose in the ideological field, and late capitalism, for its part, finds it increasingly difficult to fill that gap.² Funding from the imperialist centers, principally the U. S. government, is an important reason for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan and elsewhere, especially in its extremist and terrorist forms. The principal reason, however, is the absence of any other attractive ideological force and the deep material roots of totalizing religious ideology in parts of the world where precapitalist formations are dominant.

To return to our main theme: the social base for a secular and modernizing Afghanistan had been driven outside the country. But the second reason for the U. S. failure to connect with this base is, I think, the central one: *U. S. policy makers don't make this connection because they don't want to do so.*

To understand this fully, we need the three-agent model, mentioned above. This model could, of course, be further complicated to include long-standing territorial, ethnic, religious and economic divisions, but it should suffice to make the main point.

First among the agents, of course, is the precapitalist nexus: the Taliban, the warlords, and (this must be added), the drug lords. All three are, of course, closely intertwined; the relation of the opium trade to transnational capitalist finance is also a crucial matter for future research (should anyone wish to risk embarking on it). The narco-economy — estimated to be *one-half*

1 Henry Kissinger is said to have gleefully chortled: "We gave them [the Soviet Union] their Vietnam!" The irony of this claim is clear now. The Soviet military intervention, at the request of the Afghan government and under the terms of existing treaties, was ultimately ineffective, but Afghanistan is now the (second) "Vietnam" of the *United States*, not the (first) "Vietnam" of the Soviet Union. Again, the long history of Soviet cross-border relations with Afghanistan is vital to understanding Soviet military involvement beginning in 1979.

2 Readers might wish to refer to our special issue, "The Deep Structure of the Present Moment," edited by Renate Bridenthal (July 2005), for several articles that elaborate this conception.

of GDP — creates huge obstacles to democratic progress within the country, adding to the inherited backwardness and division, all of which plays into the hands of the religious and secular elites.

The second agent is the progressive community, described above. It is, as noted, a small minority of the population, but a dynamic and vital one. Is it enough to serve as the basis for genuine progress? We will return to this central question, but perhaps wisdom begins by renouncing twin extreme views: a naive assumption that this community somehow “must” prevail, on the one hand; and a fatalistic denial that such an outcome is even possible, on the other.

The subaltern peasantry and others who barely survive in the low-level informal economy of the cities and towns are the majority, and form the passive medium upon which the agential forces act. Since the progressive community has the potential to address the genuine interests of the peasantry and semi-proletariat, it alone can potentially bring these sectors into active consciousness and participation. While care must be taken in characterizing entire strata, or even “peoples,” as lacking the capacity to act politically in their own interests, I think Marx was essentially correct when he made this claim, as he did with regard to the French peasantry (in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*).

The third agent, of course, is the U. S.-led coalition. This agent has interests distinctly different from those of the other two: it seeks secular development in Afghanistan *under transnational capitalist control*. This means, for example, not just “markets.” Whenever capitalist ideologues speak of “markets,” they mean something quite specific: domination by transnational corporations and finance. In short, the “markets” they have in mind will work to their liking only under conditions of capitalist hegemony, in the classical Gramscian sense: the conceptual limits of capitalist private property must be fully implanted in popular consciousness and must form the basis for the political process. This, needless to say, was not true in Afghanistan at the time of the PDPA, nor is it true there today.

Just as “the market” means — in the lexicon of the third agent — capitalist hegemony, so “democracy” means capitalist political control. Whenever Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama speak of “orderly” transitions, you know they mean formal democracy that secures capitalist rule, rather than genuine democratic empowerment that challenges that rule. Theorem: from the standpoint of the capitalist ruling class, there is no such thing as social change that is simultaneously genuine and “orderly.”

So agent #3 is for a specific *kind* of secular development in Afghanistan, one that secures the requirements for capitalist domination, both internally and geo-strategically. “Class analysis,” under present-day conditions of an evolving transnational capitalist class, itself in a fluid and sometimes

contradictory state, does not mean adherence to any simple notion of class interest: in, for example, oil, or drugs, or raw materials, or profits from military production/procurement, or specific national markets. The old forms of imperialism — colonial rule, even *in situ* neocolonial domination — may not be present, but the general interest of transnational capital is certainly present. This interest lies in offsetting and preventing genuine social development, of a sort that could shape the formless unrest driving popular protest throughout Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa — not to speak of Latin America — into a serious challenge to capitalist hegemony. It is therefore not only present, but overriding.

To sum up. The “enigma” of Afghanistan exists because the U. S. coalition (the transnational capitalist class) does not really want secular progress and democracy in that country (or anywhere else) — *because it can't have these on its own terms*. If U. S. policy makers really wanted to “win” in Afghanistan, in the sense of breaking the Taliban, they would approach the Afghan progressive community (inside the country and in diaspora), and promote formation of a transitional government. But that regime would include the left as a major component! Better to let the Afghan people suffer under the mullahs and the ridiculous, corrupt “government” of Hamid Karzai (the “Mayor of Kabul”), and “reach out” by handing out candy bars to children, while wreaking death and destruction in “military” operations.

Once we understand the situation in three-agent terms, then, things become clearer. The central demand of the antiwar movement — *Get Out of Afghanistan Now!* — has full moral and practical justification, just as its counterpart did during the Vietnam War years. This is true even given the harsh realities of Afghanistan's social landscape; we certainly should not minimize the difficulties faced by progressive forces in that country. One might even say that if the left can prevail in that environment, it can prevail anywhere; some sense of that fact, and its ideological significance, might indeed help explain the importance attached to the Afghanistan War in the policy centers of capitalist imperialism.

But of this we can be sure: the U. S. military does *not* have the interests of the Afghan people at heart. The best way we can help the people throw off the shackles of their direct oppressors and achieve real democracy and development is to do what we in the United States *can* do: force our government to withdraw. Put differently: the only way to help Afghanistan throw off the barbarous relics of its precapitalist past — however long that may turn out to take — is to cut off the tentacles that bind it to the imperial transnational capitalist present.³

3 Special thanks to Adam Schesch for critical advice concerning an early draft of this essay.



IN THIS ISSUE

Into a growing literature that recuperates and chronicles the work of the Communist Party USA in the U. S. South, especially during the 1930s, Timothy V. Johnson now adds a new element. The theory of the right to national self-determination, as applied to the “black-belt” counties of the South — whatever we may ultimately decide as to its validity or as to the manner of its application at the time — was a powerful ingredient in the world view that enabled Communists to reach out to the African American people, especially where precapitalist conditions were pervasive. The consciousness associated with the self-determination demand played a crucial role in organizing. Johnson describes the work of the Alabama Share Croppers Union, which was carried out under the yoke of intense repression and violence; he uses hitherto unavailable sources (especially the Comintern archives) to develop this story and trace its relation to the national-question theory as it existed at the time.

Argentina-based researchers Lucas Poy and Daniel Gaido provide a valuable portrait of a figure who is not well known outside Argentina: the German immigrant Germán Avé-Lallemant, who played a major role in bringing Marxism to that country in the period 1880–1910. Their study traces the scholarship and political work of this erudite and polymath engineer and intellectual, and shows that the Marxist movement produced creative and original analyses of Argentina in relation to Europe, Britain and the United States. Drawing upon and reflecting the thinking of the Second International, Lallemant and his cohorts also delved into the specific conditions of the country’s native population, its complex class structure, and its unique cultural makeup.

We have paired together two related but different papers: Mark Neocleous’ “War on Waste: Law, Original Accumulation and the Violence of Capital,” and Wilhelm Peekhaus’ “Primitive Accumulation and Enclosure of the Commons: Genetically Engineered Seeds and Canadian Jurisprudence.” Both writers affirm the continuing (and not just historical) importance of Marx’s concept of primitive or original accumulation. Neocleous uses this framework to understand the ideological role of the notion of “waste,” especially in Locke, while Peekhaus relates it to the blatant misuse of patent law (in Canada in this case) by megafirms such as Monsanto, to dispossess and destroy small farmers and to disrupt and dominate organic agriculture.

Communications in this issue address earlier work in *S&S*, and we expect further rounds of discussion to emerge. Russell Dale examines Marx’s

mathematical manuscripts, and especially his thinking about the nature of the derivative function in calculus, as this was interpreted by Guglielmo Carchedi (in *S&S*, October 2008). At issue is the view that the dialectic is inherently temporal, in a specific sense of this term as used by the temporalist school within political economy. Thomas Purcell focuses on the study of Venezuelan cooperatives by Camila Piñeiro Harnecker (July 2009), who sought after conditions in which cooperative consciousness can be led to expand into wider social, and socialist, consciousness. Using his own research and experience, Purcell argues that cooperatives need to be understood as part of a wider political economy in which their roles may be defined by forces quite different from those of cooperativist ideology. (Question: are these views antithetical? What would their unification imply, or require?)

Finally, we note here the review article by Paddy Quick, on a new work, *Class Struggle on the Home Front: Work, Conflict and Exploitation in the Household*, edited by Graham Cassano. Cassano's collection includes, and is edited from the perspective of, the postmodern Marxist approach of Richard Wolff, Steve Resnick and Harriet Fraad. Quick's pointed critique will be of interest to the many followers, and indeed critics, of this prolific enterprise.

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