

EAA Interview with the Authors of Fragments of the Afghan Frontier



Benjamin D. Hopkins.

*Benjamin D. Hopkins and Magnus Marsden are, respectively, a historian and an anthropologist. In 2011, they coauthored *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*. The book is intended for both the public and scholars. In his review of *Fragments*, Mark Beauteament, former UK Ministry of Defence district political officer in Sangin, Helmand Province, Afghanistan during 2009–10, who worked with British Commandos and US Marines, commented, “Frag-*



Magnus Marsden.

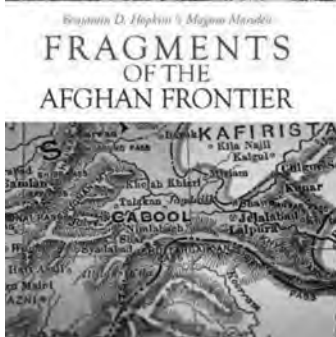
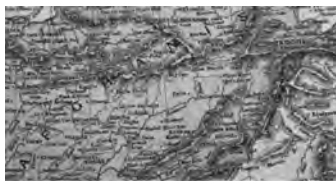
ments of the Afghan Frontier combines painstaking recent anthropological field research with extensive historical analysis to assess Afghanistan’s frontier regions and people.”¹ Hopkins and Marsden provide historical, economic, and cultural perspectives on the most conflict-ridden region in the Afghan war that do not appear elsewhere in the special section.

Lucien: Thank you for agreeing to an interview for our special section on Afghanistan. One key point of your 2011 book is that the US and its allies, like the nineteenth-century British, have attempted to make use of knowledge of allegedly local traditions to attain policy objectives, but that the underlying strategy did not and will not work. How, in your opinion, is this strategy fundamentally flawed?

Benjamin and Magnus: During their governance of the frontier, the British Raj made the use of local “tradition” a cornerstone of their rule. Colonial authorities believed the most effective and cheapest way to ensure order along this otherwise-violent periphery was to allow the tribesmen to govern themselves within overarching limits set by imperial administrators. Rather than employing a single version of such indirect rule along the frontier, the British sanctioned a number of variants to coexist side by side, taking pride in the localism of imperial control.

Yet British governance of the frontier was neither as benign nor as “hands-off” as imperial authorities believed. Although the British claimed to rule via local “tradition,” they were in truth ruling through their own colonially arbitrated forms of tradition, which at times had little to do with local practice. In order to rule through tradition, one had first to define it. And that power of definition rested firmly with colonial administrators. More important were the aims of British policy along the frontier. Their “respect” of local “traditions” was aimed at excluding the inhabitants of this space from the colonial sphere. They did not want to integrate this area as a normal part of the colonial state or render the tribesmen imperial subjects. Such an exercise would not be cost-effective given the relative poverty of the region combined with the recalcitrance of the frontier tribes. Thus, frontier rule was predicated on limited aims to be pursued by cost-effective methods.

The US and its allies in Afghanistan are today pursuing many of the same strategies and employing many of the same methods formerly utilized by British imperial administrators. This includes a focus on employing “local traditions” to govern the inhabitants of the frontier. As in the past, there has



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been a tendency for foreign actors involved in this region to treat its people’s modes of behaving as the one-dimensional products of their cultures and traditions. These cultures and traditions are thought of as constant, unchanging, and timeless. The inhabitants of the frontier are thus depicted as “tribesmen”—code for primitive—and their social ills, such as the near-constant violence of the past thirty years, are ascribed to their “fanatical” nature.

It is no doubt important to understand local cultures. Doing so can help reduce misunderstandings between locals and outsiders, and in the current conflict, this may ultimately mitigate the physical damage caused by war and lessen the number of casualties. Indeed, the US and its allies ostensibly recognize the importance of culture in their military operations, and they have created and incorporated programs involving anthropologists and sociologists to gather cultural knowledge as contextual frameworks for military commanders. Yet cultures are contested, and traditions are time bound. They are social artifacts, constructed, imagined, and re-imagined over

time, and as such are complex, fluid, and ever-changing. Furthermore, they are, in part, created by and reflective of the inequitable distribution of power in society.

People in different sectors of society might hold very different views about the authenticity, or lack thereof, of a particular practice. Moreover, cultures do not shape society and peoples uniformly. They are interpreted and experienced through their carriers—individual human beings and the webs of social relations of which they are made. By treating Afghans, then, as the inheritors of an unchanging culture, one often depicted as founded on principles foreign to those of the West, the US, and its allies have contributed to simplifying stereotypes of both Afghans and their complex pasts and present. In the worst instances, such modes of thinking about Afghan culture have led the US to pursue policies that have a detrimental effect on people’s lives. By treating the Afghans as the inheritors of a singular Afghan culture, they have introduced policies to one part of the country that are built upon the traditions and customs of another part. Thus, they have lit-

tle or no salience in the setting to which they have been introduced. Such actions have heightened rather than stemmed tensions between the country's culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

As important as misunderstanding Afghan culture is a wilful ignorance of the colonial origins of the administrative culture, which the US and its allies are currently replicating. Whether consciously or not, the US is employing many of the same methods previously authored by British frontier administrators. But the objectives of the British Empire of India were considerably different than those of the current US-led efforts in Afghanistan. Although frontier administration during the Raj was designed to help the British stay, the objective of the US and allies today is to leave Afghanistan.

Lucien: *Another criticism you make of extra-regional political actors who attempt to influence events in Afghanistan is that they too narrowly define the frontier geographically. What crucial definitional mistakes have been made, and how do they impede efforts to stabilize Afghanistan?*

Benjamin and Magnus: Afghanistan and its people are greatly misunderstood in the Western policy and public imagination because they are so foreign to the experience of many. Consequently, both are subject to caricature. In the case of the former, talk of a "failed state" has become ubiquitous. In the case of the latter, they are continually labelled as "tribal" and "fanatical." Such caricatures are hallmarks of both ignorance and intellectual laziness. This is unfortunate and has negative implications both for the Afghans and for those they encounter.

Western understandings of this space are founded, by and large, on the observations of British administrators in India authored during the nineteenth century. These administrators largely defined the Afghans and Afghanistan for themselves, for the Afghans, and for future generations. In many ways, we remain trapped by British conceptual constructs, such as the "tribal" nature of Afghan society and its essential ungovernability. As early as 1815, Mountstuart Elphinstone, the first British ambassador to the Afghan court and author of *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, wrote of the "republican spirit" of the mountain "tribes," which he insisted resembled that of the Highland clans of his native Scotland. By uncritically ingesting these comparisons, we fail to take into account the context of their creation. The British defined Afghans and Afghanistan as such out of a heady combination of ignorance and imperial imperative.

In particular, the ways the British defined, delineated, and governed the frontier separating their domains in India and those of the Afghan ruler imposed a kind of imperial utilitarianism. To the British, governing the frontier in the same way they governed the north Indian plains—which meant ruling over the inhabitants of this space as full-fledged imperial subjects—would require an expense and effort that could not be justified in light of the poor returns this area and its people promised. Moreover, as a frontier marking the limits of British power, beyond which lay menacing dangers such as an expanding Czarist Empire in Central Asia, imperial governance of this space was subject to the dictates of strategic imperatives. The British wanted to keep the frontier "wild" so that any potential invader would face a virtual hornet's nest; at the same time, they wanted to contain that "wildness" and encapsulate it so that it did not threaten the settled areas of the British Empire. They thus created the tribal agencies, which today more or less constitute the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan.

What is important to remember is that British governance of this area was a means to an end rather than an end in itself. That end was the security of the imperial state, not the good of imperial subjects nor the welfare of local inhabitants. By mimicking British methods of frontier rule in contexts fundamentally different from which those methods were originally developed and deployed, Pakistan and the US-led coalition in Afghanistan are following a perilous course that promises outcomes very much at odds

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with the stated aims of these actors. How can the state of Pakistan integrate the frontier-dwellers into the national body politic as citizens by using imperial methods of exclusion and traditionalization? How can the US-led coalition construct a liberal political order in Afghanistan, integrating the frontier-dwellers as citizens of the state, through the use of methods of imperial subjugation? Rather than integrating frontier-dwellers into larger political orders, these methods were designed, and historical experience has shown that they cut them off instead. Neither Pakistan nor the US-led coalition can employ the methods of British imperial rule for the construction of democratic nation-states. Nor will these methods, which emphasize local particularities, support the entrenchment of the powers of the central state.

Lucien: *One of the most pervasive international media portraits of Afghanistan is that of a society bedevilled by both intensely high levels of corruption and a lack of any semblance of an honest and productive business class. Please react to the accuracy of these depictions.*

Benjamin and Magnus: The image of Afghan businessmen and merchants as being corrupt, if not also incompetent, has grown in strength and importance since the events that led to the closure of one of Afghanistan's most visible post-Taliban institutions: the Kabul Bank. These images portray Afghans as being the heirs of a simplistic, if not primitive, peddling economy that is little-suited to the pressures and formal requirements of the modern world. Yet such images fail to do justice to the complex trading structures and practices that modern Afghan merchants have built. Nor do they give recognition to the ways in which Afghans have developed modes of doing business that are uniquely adapted to the context of fluidity and flux in which they work. Historically, traders in Afghanistan, far from being simple peddlers, forged ties and relations that extended across multiple geographic and political boundaries and allowed them to profit from their world, while also reacting rapidly to the changes unfolding in it. Today, Afghan businesspeople are also able to withstand the pressures placed upon them by war and conflict, move goods across boundaries and spaces, and demonstrate considerable creativity and skill in activities in which they are involved.

As a result of being part of such networks and holding the types of skills and attributes required of traders, Afghans are not only important in their own country, but also known as expert businesspeople in places beyond. Although people in the West tend to think of Afghans in terms of primitivism, ethnic difference, fundamentalist Islam, or tribalism, people in neighboring countries often associate Afghans with flexibility, cleverness, and skill as merchants.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, for example, Afghans introduced Central Asians to the tactics and strategies of trade and, in some countries, continue to play an important role as middlemen traders, bringing goods from Iran, Turkey, and Southeast Asia to the tables of Central Asian Muslims. This same capacity to trade and adapt to different circumstances is equally visible in Afghan trading communities in Iran, Pakistan, the Arab Gulf, and Europe.

Paradoxically, Afghans are portrayed as central players in a global illicit economy centered on drugs, smuggling, and even human trafficking. Rather than seeking to understand the complex modes and trading strategies

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Afghans have developed in a highly unstable environment, commentators simply characterize them as corrupt, focusing on the trade in drugs and inhabiting dangerous segments of an underground economy. Lost in this are the multiple and sophisticated ways in which Afghan traders interact with and shape a globally integrated economy through the cosmopolitan and far-ranging economic networks they have constructed over time.

Lucien: *Please situate the Taliban within the context of Islam as it is practiced and promulgated in Afghanistan and its frontier.*

Benjamin and Magnus: Islam along the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier, like everywhere else in the world, is a complex, rich, and dynamic influence on people’s lives. There has been a tendency, however, to focus on the so-called extremist manifestations of Islam in this area, at the expense of recognizing the importance of the multiple ways in which Islamic concepts, rituals, and practices influence Muslims in everyday life.

The Taliban is depicted as “fundamentalist” and “Wahabi” in the Western press, supposedly advocating a return to some sort of premodern Muslim dystopia of the eleventh century. Such caricatures are problematic on a number of levels. The first is the underlying assumption that the Taliban is a coherent religious or social movement. The plain fact is that the Taliban, especially in its post-2001 incarnation, is very poorly understood. The second is the confusion regarding religious fundamentalism. “Radical Muslims” are too often homogenized under conceptual umbrellas such as “political Islam” or “Islamic fundamentalism.” Yet these are very different strains of intellectual and religious thinking, which are often quite at odds with one another. The “political Islam” advocated and supported by groups such as al-Qaeda, Hibz-i Islami, and Jamiat-i Islami—which largely challenge the roles and power of traditional holders of religious authority such as *mullahs*, *sayyids*, and *pirs*—is very different from the conservative reli-

gious retrenchment advocated by the likes of the Jamiat Ulama-e Islam or indeed the Taliban before the events of 2001.

In many ways, the Taliban combines the traditions of reformist Islam developed in north India from the eighteenth century onward with local religious practices and ways of being Muslim, as well as with newer international strains of political Islam emanating from the Middle East and Arabian peninsula. At the same time, they fit into a long-standing tradition of religious movements and resistance along the frontier. On a number of occasions, the British found themselves facing off with “irrational tribesmen” whose bigotry had been whipped into a “fanatical furor” by some “mad mullah.” What the British either were unable or refused to recognize in such incidents was that Islam served as an idiom of resistance with which the inhabitants of the frontier could collectively face the outside world. It provided a unifying language that superseded parochial concerns and allowed for fleeting super-tribal confederations. This is not to say the religious sensibilities of frontier inhabitants were not activated in such instances; it is to say, though, that such incidents were more complex social moments than simply outbreaks of fanaticism.

Although the Taliban is not the first incarnation of movements of Islamic reform in this region, they can take little comfort from historical precedent. Generally speaking, such movements have been effective at mobilizing local inhabitants who feel themselves under threat from interventionist external authorities. The withdrawal of such authorities in the past has usually signalled the end of the mediatory power of religious leaders and their movements. The Taliban may experience a different fate, however, because of the context in which they evolved and currently inhabit. The more than thirty years of conflict marking Afghanistan following the 1978 Communist Revolution has fundamentally upended and displaced Afghan society. We cannot, with any certainty or depth, talk about the ways it is being reconstituted and reconstructed. Thus, the structural social limits that hampered the long-term growth of religious movements along the frontier may very well have been destroyed. Things could turn out very differently this time.

Lucien: *You also take issue with the notion that villages in Afghanistan and the frontier are largely cut off from the rest of the world. Please elaborate.*

Benjamin and Magnus: One of the most widely held and long-standing

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assumptions about Afghanistan is that the people living in its villages are cut off from the modern world. It is usual, for example, to hear the chief executive officers of multinational companies claiming that they have brought the world to Afghanistan's isolated villages. Such images are problematic both for the past and the present. Historically, Afghans travelled widely. Several historical studies have shown how the experience of travel fashioned their understandings of themselves as Afghans in contexts beyond the geographical confines of the country. As importantly, these diasporic Afghans have had a significant impact on the societies they have migrated and travelled to. In the present day, Afghan villages are also tied to the wider world, both through older trading networks and migration patterns, as well as by other, newer flows of people, such as those produced by war and conflict. Afghans not only inhabit but also create a world that expands across national borders. Their thinking and understanding of events in their own country and those beyond reflects this. They are culturally, economically, and politically attuned to and plugged into a globalized world that both affects them and which they affect. By treating Afghan villagers as the inhabitants of secluded villages rather than recognizing their deep connectedness to other regional and more global settings, those who have intervened in the country have downplayed the sophistication and indeed cosmopolitanism of Afghans and their complex modes of thinking and living in the world.

Lucien: *What policy alternatives would you recommend for governments in developed countries and NGOs who wish to work with Afghans to build a more stable and peaceful future?*

Benjamin and Magnus: It must be acknowledged from the beginning that this is a very difficult question. Indeed, if it were not, we would not still be asking it eleven years after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. We also need to be honest about the limits of policy options. No state, NGO, or international organization operates in a political vacuum but rather is subject to the constraints of domestic and international politics. In a number of instances, politics have been the key factor. For example, the American decision to withdraw major combat forces from Afghanistan by 2014 has little to do with Afghanistan itself and quite a bit to do with the US electoral calendar.

Further, we need to note the frustration and suspicion policymakers and academics sometimes evince toward one another. At its worst, these camps throw mutual recriminations at one another. Policymakers portray academics as pointy-headed dunces, removed from reality in the confines of the ivory tower. Academics, on the other hand, condescendingly shake their heads, aghast at the ignorance that rules the world. Both parties are at fault here, though for different reasons. Importantly, much of the frustration and consequent recrimination may be because these camps speak different languages. Both recognize that knowledge is power; policymakers want to exploit it as such, whereas many academics are wary of wielding it in such utilitarian ways.

Given this, the advice we offer will likely seem disappointing for a lack of practical application. Rather than offering a positive "to do" list of actionable recommendations, our scholarship recommends a deeper, more reflective approach. It calls for the treatment of Afghans and Afghanistan not as an inscrutable problem to be solved by the import of Western policy solutions, but rather to be based on an acknowledgment of the complex and sophisticated historical realities of the region. Referring to Afghans as "tribesmen," their state as "failed," and their business practices as "corrupt" only serves to reinforce negative and unthinking stereotypes that get in the way rather than facilitate progress in the region. Only by jettisoning much of this useless conceptual baggage will Western governments and NGOs be in a position to make a positive difference in the region.

Further, and more profoundly, we recommend that those involved in Afghanistan acknowledge their limits—of knowledge, power, and ability to

influence events. It seems that much of the tragedy evolving in Afghanistan today is grounded in a toxic combination of hubris and ignorance. There is a belief that either the US and its allies can easily replicate and improve upon past successes of others in the region, thus sidestepping the failures of others, or that things this time around are somehow so fundamentally different that the past does not matter at all. Both beliefs are highly quixotic and self-defeating. Instead, developed governments and NGOs should be clear about what they can do, or indeed should do, and what ultimately must fall to the Afghans themselves. Although the international community may put in place the institutions of the Afghan state, they cannot fill them with meaning. They cannot "nation-build," they can only "state-build." Recognition of this should lead to a significant reordering of priorities and approaches. ■

NOTES

1. Mark Beautement, "Review, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*," *e-International Relations*, May 16, 2012, last accessed June 19, 2012, <http://bit.ly/JGCL6n>.

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