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Reflections on Researching Afghanistan

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Afghanistan is a beautiful country and makes for a fascinating social science case study. Landlocked and sandwiched between Persia/Iran in the west, the Russosphere to the north, China in the north-east, and India/Pakistan to the south and east, Afghanistan has a diverse physical and human geography. The dissecting mountain ranges of the Hindu Kush, four major river systems and harsh deserts, including the *Dasht-e-Margo* ('plain of death') and *Registan* ('land of sand') have resulted in a fragmentary, largely rural and feudal-like tribal society in the provinces and a historically weak central state in Kabul's mountain basin. Afghans popularly hold a strong sense of national identity, yet one perhaps defined more by differences than commonalities, loyalties leaning first to family, second unto God and third to country. Shah compared this mode of life with pre-modern Scotland, "a clan system, governed by predatory chiefs". However, while Shah assumed that this "eventuated in similar modern conditions" (1982:9), Afghanistan is not a sovereign state in the Eurocentric, post-Westphalian sense. Rather, Afghanistan suffers contested sovereignty, exhibits degrees of all four of Collier's theorised 'traps' (2008:17-78) and represents the epitome of an endemically fragile, conflict-affected state.

When researching my doctoral thesis, 'Europeanization of Foreign Aid: Managing Post-9/11 Fragile, Conflict-Affected States' (Flint, 2019), I was interested in how, within European institutional discourse(s), some (aid) ideas gained salience while others did not. Afghanistan served as the central case study, my research stemming from a sabbatical from undergraduate study in International Relations to serve as a Rifleman in Helmand province as part of UK contributions towards the International Security Assistance Force (on Operation Herrick 9). This was in part to conduct research towards my then undergraduate dissertation project, an experience which led to my doctoral thesis and a desire to promote change through revelation by challenging dominant understanding(s), as with critical theory tradition (see Geuss, 1981).

In addition to credible literature on Afghanistan's socio-politics and history (for example, Barfield, 2010; Roy, 1990) in what Said would consider a "complex dialectic of reinforcement" (2003:94), a broad discourse has developed about post-9/11 Afghanistan and

notably the interpretation of an ideological Neo-Taliban insurgency. Some facets of this discourse may be judged more trustworthy than others. Here, primary research through ethnographic field strategies can be invaluable in building qualitative, contextually ‘thick’ understanding and in contributing towards a ‘triangulation’ of methods (see Berg, 2009:5-8, 190-237). However, amidst violent environments, such endeavors are laden with difficulties (Berg, 2009:209-213; also see Nordstrom and Robben, 1995). Constraining factors include striking bargains to gain access and dangers of invisibility, but also ethical considerations (and an institution’s duty of care for its researchers). Fall (the author of *Street Without Joy*, originally published in 1961) is a case in-extremis, having been killed by a landmine in 1967. More recently, Stępień (2017) constitutes an excellent example of embedding with the Polish military in Afghanistan, while exploring Polish aid contributions. Stewart’s (2004) book on his individual travels throughout Afghanistan is a further, more popular, if general work.

Within the context of a sabbatical, my experience in Afghanistan was relatively free of academic constraints and bureaucratic ethical curtailments (if not broader research ethics) and may be best considered covert-*esque* ethnography in approach – my being participant and observer¹. As a serving soldier on force-protection and counterinsurgency operations within ISAF, I did not have the individual agency of Stępień (2017), nor the unconstrained freedom of Stewart (2004): it is recognized that “identification with either faction... limits one’s research freedom” (Henry, 1966:553). However, as with Stępień, I was aptly embedded within one dimension of my social phenomena of study, while I also had the lawful recourse to defend myself in the non-permissive environment. More frankly, access to Helmand of such duration during this period (2008-2009) would have otherwise been unfeasible.

My foremost tool in undertaking this was a digital diary for field notes (see Berg, 2009:218-220), its commencing, “This document is to be a record... Its aim is twofold...” (Flint, 2009:1). This ‘twofold aim’ was as a memoir and general historical account, with my undergraduate dissertation and further study explicitly in-mind. The maintenance of this diary was permitted, albeit somewhat limited through the need to take care to avoid breaching operational security, or the official secrets act (HMG, 1989). A greater hurdle was found in the narrow perspective afforded by my role and its much-curtailed freedom of movement. However, the most significant hurdle was that of wearing ‘two-hats’ and the difficulty in

¹ Those who identify as professional anthropologists/ethnographers might very well dispute that this experience was academic at all; it was not relied upon for my thesis in part for this reason.

separating the two. Review of the research log's content finds perhaps greater soldiering-related gripes than it does objective and analytical observation.

The experience in Afghanistan was invaluable for the identification of the doctoral research problem, its nuances - notably in terms of discrete institutional perspectives and associated discrete socially-attributed meaning - and for qualitative insights into Afghanistan more broadly. However, in undertaking the doctoral research, further primary data collection was necessary and conducted through 35 elite interviews, supported by archival strategies, spanning relevant Whitehall, Brussels and European third-sector agencies. This mandated the development of a considered ethics strategy in light of its obtrusive elements and in appreciation of University ethics policy and social science norms of best practice with regards to rights of consent, anonymity and withdrawal. The successful peer-review of this was essential for the research to progress. A potentially more significant hurdle was the Ministry of Defence's Research Ethics Committee (MODREC) process, in effect acting as gatekeeper to the defence community – an institutional perspective of vital importance to the research. Fortuitously, my Afghanistan experience meant I had established associations. With the research being historically-bounded and the MOD undergoing a retention crisis, access to recently retired individuals was also facilitative.

In summary, the most exciting case study opportunities on the surface may well be the hardest to research in practice, their entailing potentially prohibitive barriers in terms of access, ethics and reasonable risk – especially where ethnographic field strategies are concerned. Where ethnographic data collection is *covert-esque* and with access gained through serving on one side of a violent armed struggle as it originally was here, the potential also arises for inhibited research freedom, prejudiced thinking and a compromised objectivity on the part of the researcher. Nonetheless, where a qualitative and/or critical approach is sought, the closeness and dialogic character of such research can mean for the revelation of invaluable qualitative insights when grounded in a robust framework.

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