“Foreign Passports Only”: Geographies of (Post)Conflict Work in Kabul, Afghanistan

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“Foreign Passports Only”: Geographies of (Post)Conflict Work in Kabul, Afghanistan

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Geopolitical “peace-building” relies increasingly on intersections of neoliberal economies of war, violent conflict, and corruption. This article addresses U.S.-led international (post)war aid and development through a spatial examination of Kabul, Afghanistan, examining international worker epistemologies of Afghanistan and “post” conflict aid and development to investigate the spaces of privilege and power associated with political influence, (in)security, and economic and spatial inequities (2006–2008). I draw on recent scholarship in critical feminism, geography, and development studies and the work of Giorgio Agamben regarding the sovereign body and state of exception to demonstrate the spatial disparities and resource inequalities between the “international community” defined as the (un)commonwealth and “local” Afghans. I examine the sovereign status of the (un)commonwealth who manage, assist, or financially profit from international aid and development economies through four interrelated themes: economic and spatial exclusion, (in)security, mobility, and cosmopolitan auxiliary economies. Key Words: Afghanistan, development geography, international workers, sovereignty, state of exception.

Critical geographies of peace and war increasingly discuss the interlocking spaces of neoliberal economic structures and practices of development, humanitarian aid, geopolitics, and militarism (Hyndman 2000; Power 2003; Roberts, Secor, and Sparke 2003; Katz 2005; Kothari 2005; Laurie and Bondi 2005; Coleman 2007; Sparke 2007; Vandergeest, Idahosa, and Bose 2007). Geographers and other critical researchers also link these macroscale global economic and political imbalances with racial, orientalist, and gendered discourses that influence economic, political, and legal actions (White 2002; Olds, Sidaway, and Sparke 2005; Gregory and Pred 2006; Coleman 2007; Klein 2007). I add to these studies by examining...
humanitarian aid and development workers in a postwar conflict zone, arguing that peace geographies of development are interlinked with neoliberal economics and imperial geopolitics that are spatially organized and embodied by international aid and development workers. Rather than “developing Afghanistan,” this situation results in an extension and reproduction of hierarchical wealth and uneven development. Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan, is a key site for the U.S.-led international system of neoliberal economics and militarized violence. In spaces such as Afghanistan, “free markets” exist within a formal system of regulation marred by extensive corruption, inconsistency, and insecurity (Johnson and Leslie 2002; Ewans 2005; Rubin 2006; Rashid 2008).

Everyday life operates in this place of inequity and corruption, and both Afghans and internationals participate in and resist this system in various ways. This is not a flawed version of an existing system but rather an outgrowth of proxy war geopolitics and neoliberal free-market economic development, which benefits citizens of sovereignty and ensures the continued poverty of Afghans, or citizens of exception. The state of exception refers to extralegal practices (such as the suspension of rights) within the context of a legal framework that is temporally bounded and often follows a state of emergency (such as 11 September 2001), and as Agamben (2003, 2) argues, the “state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics.” The sovereign body that acts outside the law claims his or her application of law under the framework of legal exception to the law. This legal exception also corresponds to the sovereign body’s legal home-citizenship status while placed within a space of exception. Gregory (2004) identifies locations that exhibit a continual state of legal exception and corporeal violence (i.e., Afghanistan) as spaces of exception. There is also an embodied mobility and privilege associated with one’s location-based sovereign-citizenship or claim to “legitimate” and legal sovereignty. I define citizens of sovereignty as individuals who may live and work in places marked by a continual state of exception, while retaining benefits associated with their legitimate and “acceptable” sovereign citizenship (confirmed by one’s passport or visa). Conversely, citizens of exception exist within the bounded spaces of their citizen-affiliated state, which is defined as rogue or failed by a more powerful and legitimate sovereign. The sovereign state subsequently monitors, occupies, or partially controls the “illegitimate” state. Citizens of sovereignty living within such sites of exception experience political and economic legitimacy and sovereignty not afforded to the “local” citizens of exception.

This article analyzes the sovereign bodies of international workers who manage, assist, or financially profit from international aid and development economies. A thorough examination of the complexities surrounding aid and development in Afghanistan requires more space than permitted in this article. Therefore, I focus on international workers through four interrelated themes: economic and spatial exclusion and exclusivity, spatial marginalization and (in)security, mobility, and cosmopolitan auxiliary economies. I begin with a brief review of the literature, followed by an overview of my research methods, results, summary, and conclusions.

**Literature Review**

In Afghanistan, the history of continued resistance to invasion is equally marked by a common unwillingness of imperialist nations to see and work with Afghans as equals. Rather, Afghans are identified as “uncivilized or traditional” and therefore force rather than diplomacy becomes the most “suitable” option for engagement (Ewans 2005; Rashid 2008). Current aid and development approaches seek to discipline the Afghan population into their peripheral position within the global neoliberal economic structure through modernization and capital-driven privatization (Atmar 2001; Barakat and Wardell 2002; Goodhand 2002; Johnson and Leslie 2002, 2004; Nawa 2006; Rubin 2006; Suhrke 2007). Modernization efforts to “liberate” Afghan women are also marred by neoliberal approaches and hegemonic feminist frameworks (Aatifaab 2005; Abirafeh 2005; Davis 2005; Zulfacar 2006; Kandiyoti 2007).

The geopolitics of humanitarian aid and development assistance has a long history of mirroring rather than subverting or critiquing neoliberal economics and their corresponding geopolitical frameworks (Baitenmann 1990; Hyndman 2000; McKinnon 2000; Fox 2001; Roberts, Secor, and Sparke 2003; Barnett 2005; Kothari 2005; Belloni 2007; Coleman 2007; Leebaw 2007; Sparke 2007). Critiques of international humanitarian aid and development highlight common themes, such as the increased role of neoliberal economic theory on aid and development praxis that strengthen donor states and further weaken recipient states (Hancock 1989; De Waal 1998; Hyndman 2000; Reiff 2002). These studies each briefly discuss the role of the international worker as an important agent in neoliberal aid and development. The racial and orientalist configuration of these spaces is a key component in...
shaping the development policy and in many cases a militarized response (and continual presence of foreign troops) as a necessary component of “peace-building” and humanitarianism (Woodward 2001; White 2002; Denike 2008). I focus on the international worker in an effort to “study up” (see Hyndman 2000) and within the organizations and agencies that disseminate development policy in Afghanistan.

Research Methods

This research on international workers in Kabul, Afghanistan, is based on three field site visits (summer 2006, winter 2007, summer 2008). My field methods consisted of qualitative surveys, interviews, and focus groups with a variety of international workers1 (150 international workers, 55 percent female, 45 percent male2). The data include policy reports and materials provided to me by my respondents.

Research participants (RPs) identified the diversity of international workers based on the following criteria: type of work (i.e., humanitarian aid, faith-based aid, development, private investment, or security), reasons for being in the country, level of integration with Afghans, and length of time in Afghanistan (range of one month to six years), more than one’s nationality or home location (North America, Europe, or Australia). Similarly my data identified that RPs’ specific patterns of thought, behavior, and perceptions of Afghanistan corresponded to these categories. Also, the overwhelming majority of respondents (98 percent) reported a profound lack of training and knowledge about Afghanistan prior to their arrival.3

RPs identified themselves as modern/western (and used these terms interchangeably), unquestionably preferable and progressive in direct contrast to the “traditional/conservative” society of Afghanistan within which they were working (also see Kabeer 1994; Davis 2005). English was the primary language of communication among international workers, which is largely attributed to the role of the United States as the largest donor country.

I also conducted informal discussions with and observations of workers in “international” spaces such as restaurants, shopping centers, and hotels that cater to internationals. Due to the complexities of the characteristics of both the Afghan and international workers, I provide the following categorizations of the population of individuals living in Kabul city: one-third-world international workers, two-thirds-world auxiliary economy workers, and two-thirds-world local Afghans (see Table 1). One-third/two-thirds-world terminology was chosen to “represent what Esteve and Prakash [1998] call social minorities and social majorities—categories based on the quality of life led by people in both the North and the South” (Mohanty 2004, 227). This terminology also diverges from ambiguous geographic and ideological dichotomies associated with north–south, east–west, and first–third world terminology (see Mohanty 2004).

Table 1. Overview of workers living in Kabul

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>One-third world</th>
<th>Two-thirds world</th>
<th>Two-thirds world</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International workers</td>
<td>Local Afghans</td>
<td>International workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(professional)</td>
<td>Property owner</td>
<td>(auxiliary economy)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expatriate Afghans</td>
<td>Driver</td>
<td>Security guard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment options</td>
<td>Security guard</td>
<td>Small business owner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid &amp; development</td>
<td>Small business owner</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organizations and</td>
<td>Office worker</td>
<td>Service sector employee</td>
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<tr>
<td>nongovernmental</td>
<td>Service sector employee</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organizations</td>
<td>employee</td>
<td>Sex worker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(both faith- and</td>
<td>De-miner</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>non-faith-based)</td>
<td>Domestic laborer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embassies</td>
<td>Day laborer</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Private sector organizations:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Private security,</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>contractors, logistics,</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>property management,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>war entrepreneurs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of aid/development organization based on level of financial input</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 1</td>
<td>Multimillion- to billion-dollar budget with core and continuous funding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 2</td>
<td>Multithousand- to million-dollar projects per year without core funding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 3</td>
<td>Small-scale projects without core funding and with a significant use of international volunteers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The (Un)Commonwealth

The one-third-world workers in Afghanistan identify themselves as “the international community”; however, the term community does not aptly describe the diversity of individuals and their roles in reproducing, resisting, redefining, or reaping financial benefits from existing geopolitical power structures and neoliberal economic systems. I identify this group as the (un)commonwealth to describe the commonalities provided by their sovereign and one-third-world status despite significant differences in home location, occupation, knowledge, income, and so on. Despite a common understanding of what constitutes civil society, order, economic opportunity, and modernity, I included (un) as a tool to indicate that this is not a homogenous or monolithic “community” in either geographic sovereignty or ideology. Thus, (un) is intended to act as a continual reminder of the several fissures to this commonality; however, the diversity of one-third-world internationals and the many who actively resist dominant paradigms of aid and development, the (un)commonwealth retain specific opportunities, mobility, and spatial access associated with their sovereign citizenship and one-third-world status. Not all aid and development workers receive material wealth as part of their work or presence in Afghanistan. Yet, they retain a commonwealth corporeally inscribed and identified by their “legitimate” foreign or sovereign citizenship.

There is a common epistemology (with some notable exceptions) among the (un)commonwealth that highlights modernity, modernization, and neoliberal economic and “democratic” political systems as preferable, progressive, and necessary for Afghanistan’s future. Conversely, they also recognize the immediate need for social programs, state-sponsored health care and education, a strong central government, and increases in Afghan government funding and oversight. This understanding, however, remains outside current neoliberal economic, geopolitical, and militarized systems for aid and development in Afghanistan.

In conjunction with these disparate and didactic characterizations for “developing” Afghanistan, the collective economies of the (un)commonwealth establish and reproduce spaces of comfort and convenience for their population that far exceed that of the two-thirds-world Afghans. The flows of capital aid within Kabul have developed temporally limited economies that include various business opportunities, such as logistics organizations, private security companies, service sector jobs, brothels, restaurants, malls, and shops. The individual and collective incomes of this (un)commonwealth also displaced much of the local Afghan population from specific sites in the central capital city due to the internationally induced increases in housing costs. As one RP noted, “The warlords own many of these properties, and they rent to the Peace Lords, who have the economic means to pay” (Sue 2008). The “peace lords” in Afghanistan also benefit financially from the continued conflict and threat of war by way of economic structures of postwar aid and development (also see Japan International Cooperation Agency 2006; Dittman 2007; Issa and Sardar 2007).

These economic benefits are also used to offset some of the restrictions of employment required by many organizations. For example, the majority of RPs have large salaries that are further inflated by danger pay, housing allowances, and leave time. Danger pay exemplifies the hierarchies of global capitalism and sovereign citizenship. The sovereign body, by virtue of its legitimacy, status, and affiliation with certain aid and development organizations, receives both physical and financial insurances to maintain his or her bodily needs and personal safety. Afghan salaries are fractional by comparison, do not include danger pay, and vary widely by organization and type of work. Also, working for an international nongovernmental organization (NGO), government, or private-sector group yields a much higher salary than that of their Afghan counterparts (Dittman 2007). For example, one RP noted, “If the priority is local reconstruction and capacity building why do they pay a local such low rates, $50–100 per month when an international comes in to do the same job and is paid $200 per hour” (Sally 2006).

The quantifiable value placed on the lives and work of the (un)commonwealth with acceptable and legitimate claims to sovereignty reinforces existing global class structures that ensure bodily mobility, services, comfort, and consumption to the citizens of sovereignty in stunning contrast to the citizens of exception. In addition to these economic methods used to entice international workers, spatial divisions, physical barriers, and mobility restrictions insulate many members of the (un)commonwealth from the lives of “everyday” Afghans.

Spatial (In)Security

Personal security for many members of the (un)commonwealth (particularly employees of Tier 1 and some Tier 2 organizations) include fortified
compounds that are bound by a perimeter wall, security fences, razor wire, and armed guards. This spatially bounded security provides the protected sovereign bodies inside the compound with limited spatial proximity to the “others” living outside, who are perceived to pose a continual and often undefined threat. Many compounds also employ Afghans for service sector jobs and guards are often outsourced through private security companies, which hire two-thirds-world employees from neighboring countries (Nawa 2006). International workers with strict security requirements have limited mobility; for example, they cannot enter an Afghan home, drive, or walk without a security detail.

The compound life creates a false spatial reality, which supplies both visible security for the individuals within the compound and a narrow conception of the (in)security that lies outside. It is also important to note that security is defined and experienced much differently by internationals living and working directly with Afghan communities both in and outside of the capital city (more common in Tier 2 and 3 organizations). For these individuals and organizations, security is achieved over time by building relationships with local Afghan families and community leaders. The compound dwellers of the (un)commonwealth received the highest scrutiny from their contemporaries living and working outside these security restrictions, as exemplified by the following quotes:

I don’t want to demonize the whole of the international community; however, there is a lot of arrogance. People are separated and segregated. People ride in their own prime white SUV. What can they do for the city? In a perfect world, I wish internationals thought about what they could learn from Afghans. Often they only see this place as a one-way street. (Kathy 2006)

Internationals are rude and obnoxious. Most don’t have a clue because they are stuck behind their compound walls and herded around like sheep and oblivious to the actual needs of the people here. (Jim 2006)

I think that there is a wide diversity of people working here in Afghanistan and therefore it is difficult to generalize. There are a number of people here to make money. This group generally does not mix with the Afghan population, follows security rules strictly, and may treat the locals with less respect than they deserve. Often cultural sensitivity amongst this group is minimal. There is another group that are more compassionate and committed to the results of their work. This group is more likely to develop relationships with the local population and have increased levels of cultural sensitivity. The fact that security is so tight has a negative impact on the relationship between locals and internationals as it generates a situation of segregation and frequently mistrust of the international community. (Nat 2006)

The spatial divisions between internationals and locals are part of the epistemological processes that manifest into imagined geographies of place and people. RPs who operate within spatially bounded security spaces also identified these structural divisions as problematic and undermining their “goals.” Conversely, they simultaneously identified this form of security as a necessary aspect of war-zone development.

Inside the compounds, there is little hint that you are in Afghanistan. The spatial layout of offices, homes, personal comforts, and amenities differs significantly from Afghan homes and government offices. Most two-thirds-world Afghans have “moved” to the outskirts of the city because of inflated rents or live on the mountains that surround the city where the land is free and running water and proper sanitation are scarce.

Most two-thirds-world Afghans living in Kabul have limited access to clean drinking water, electricity, Internet, and mobile phone usage due to the costs of these amenities and services. In contrast, all of my RPs (in Tier 1 and 2 organizations and most Tier 3 organizations) had daily access to hot and cold running water, bottled water for drinking and cooking, flush (Western-style) toilets, a high level of food availability, access to reliable and regular electricity (via generators), daily Internet access (in their homes, offices, or both), at least one (but more likely two or three) mobile phone, and at least one car and driver. The (un)commonwealth also experience technological efficiency and comfortable lifestyles, which occur through “imported” materials that require minimal infrastructural change in Afghanistan, whereas city-generated electricity and water accessibility remain minimal or compromised for local Afghans.

The international bodies are at times bound by security restrictions limiting their mobility within Afghanistan. Conversely, the (un)commonwealth enjoy increased mobility internationally by virtue of their sovereign citizenship, passports, and the economic means to travel. Travel outside Afghanistan provides “spatial escapes” for the (un)commonwealth and is described as essential and of high importance by the majority of RPs. International worker mobility also includes high turnover rates and short-term projects labeled by one of my RPs as “parachute-in and not quite fix development.” Short-term assignments (i.e., three months to one year) provide workers a crucial line item on their
résumés as part of a longitudinal career trajectory. The willingness to work in a war zone helps to secure a future expectation for more amenable job placement in North America or Europe. For example:

People come here for six months or one-year contracts, to build their careers in the UN and NGO world. It is a kind of résumé building... if you come [here] it looks like you are serious and hard working. There are many people working their way up for that cushy job in Geneva or New York. (Giles 2006)

High salaries are also used to entice international workers at all levels of “experience” and “expertise” to participate in the (un)commonwealth of development. Internationals overwhelmingly believe high salaries and comfortable “first-world-like” living conditions are required because they relinquish that lifestyle to work in Afghanistan. Simultaneously, Kabul has a thriving auxiliary economy that caters to the service and consumptive desires of the (un)commonwealth.

Cosmopolitan Kabul

Local Afghans are bound by economies of desperation attributed to the aftermath of a war-induced shattered infrastructure, high unemployment, low levels of education, an unskilled labor force (or one that is perceived as such), and food and other economic insecurities. These conditions stand in direct contrast to the high salaries of international workers in the (un)commonwealth. The excessive disposable incomes of these workers and their desires for one-third-world lifestyles, entertainment, and consumption have created a quasi-cosmopolitanism in Kabul city. The disposable incomes of the (un)commonwealth developed an auxiliary economy of service sector employees, private security personnel, logistics organizations, and economies of desire, including sex workers, international restaurants, shopping malls, and hotels. The disposable incomes of this (un)commonwealth also provide economic opportunities for two-thirds-world entrepreneurs who come from neighboring countries (such as Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) and open businesses to “cash in” on the excess incomes of one-third-world international workers.

The short-term work and transient nature of the (un)commonwealth exemplify sovereign citizenship and elite mobility. Members of the (un)commonwealth’s behavior, desires, and personal freedoms are chosen and often determined by the temporality of their assignments and the inability of local governance to enforce the rule of law on internationals who engage in illegal activities.

Kabul city acts as a site of exception from local, national, and international juridical processes and procedures. The low-level salaries of “officials” in all branches of Afghan governance and law enforcement personnel in conjunction with the high cost of living act as a by-product of top-heavy aid and development allocations that both create the auxiliary economies of development’s disposable incomes and provide the economic conditions for corruption. The enforcement of law is more often determined by the capital needs of underpaid government employees than by actual disciplinary structures of law and force of law (also see Agamben 1995).

Economically induced corruption helps to increase the perceived need among internationals for private “gun-for-hire” security services. Additionally, aid and development organizations largely hire international contract and logistics companies (rather than local Afghans) to (as stated by several RPs) “get the job done,” which subsequently leads such firms to hire private security companies to ensure that projects are completed with minimal casualties. Multinational corporations in this postwar-conflict system receive the primary flow of funds through layers of top-heavy capital aid inputs, which are continually subcontracted to privately run organizations and NGOs. The level of subcontracting leads to a “lack of funds” when the project begins and a subsequent use of inadequate materials and low-paid labor. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of workers in the (un)commonwealth arrive without formal training or knowledge about Afghanistan’s culture, geography, and social or political history. Local customs, norms, and laws are also dismissed by many in the (un)commonwealth.

Sovereign Privilege

The international bodies of the (un)commonwealth partake in various forms of compliance with and rejection of Afghan customs, laws, and behavioral expectations. There is a distinct spatial division in the construction and maintenance of international spaces that excludes two-thirds-world Afghans. International restaurants that serve alcohol post signs that read either “Foreign Passports Only” or “We regret we cannot serve alcohol to Afghan Nationals.” This is done in an attempt to effectively “allow” internationals to oppose Afghan law, which prohibits the consumption of
alcohol. Other places that cater to internationals do not physically prevent Afghans from entering; however, they secure exclusion through the costs of goods or services in these locations, which remain beyond the economic reach of most Afghans. The respondents in this study, when asked about these spaces of exclusion, also identified gendered and racialized reasons for barring Afghans from these spaces, as exemplified by the following quotes.

Afghans aren’t allowed into the restaurants because an Afghan man doesn’t know how to act when he sees a woman in a bathing suit. Although, I could say the same thing about most of the Western men after a few drinks. (Paul 2006)

Even though many expat establishments don’t allow Afghans in, you can’t help but “corrupt” their culture just by their presence. Some [Afghans] welcome Western influence, but other are contemptuous. When you have a place like [XX], for example, there are women sipping cocktails in their bikinis around a pool. As an expat, I think it’s great because sometimes you need that escape. And it’s just for that reason that Afghans aren’t allowed in. It’s almost an affront to their culture. But at the same time, setting up an establishment that keeps the local populations out is as well. Either way, the things that keep people like me sane, are bound to piss off the local community. (HC 2006)

The consumption of alcohol and carnival-like atmosphere of international restaurants and parties typify one aspect of the (un)commonwealth, which is not indulged in by all. The international spaces that exclude Afghans (unless they are escorted and vetted by an international) also include many international offices, businesses, and homes. Many of these places are also identified as “spatial escapes” from Afghan culture, particularly for women who are bound by greater restrictions regarding their mobility, dress, and behavioral expectations. These places exemplify the common assumptions among international workers regarding the positive and necessary aspects of consumptive modernity associated with one-third-world lifestyles as well as their identity and “sanity” while working in Afghanistan. These places also illustrate Kabul as a site of exception.

This site of exception epitomizes an economically and politically bounded space. The (un)commonwealth’s actions and leisure activities are often infused with desire or fantasy, afforded by disposable incomes, and accepted through international workers’ legitimate sovereignty and mobility. This allows (un)common fluidity and choice regarding one’s compliance with or rejection of national or international laws and local custom. The transience of the (un)commonwealth provides a carte blanche approach to personal behaviors. For example:

You know what we say here? “What happens in Kabul, stays in Kabul.” You can drink, smoke, do drugs and of course sleep around. Stuff that you wouldn’t do at home, it’s okay here because the community here is always on their way elsewhere. (Simon 2006)

Citizens of sovereignty are rarely held accountable for failures, missteps, or mistakes associated with their work in postwar dissonance zones such as Afghanistan. Ordinary Afghan citizens may also act outside the law to secure a livelihood; this behavior, continually cited by aid and development workers, ensures that corruption claims rest squarely on Afghan shoulders. The Afghan citizens of exception exemplify the sacred and profane subjects of neoliberal geopolitics—targeted for underpaid modernity and the collateral bodies of militarized discipline. The site of exception and its bounded spaces of economic opportunism, income disparities, and resource disparities secure and reproduce corruption and conflict.

Conclusions

It is imperative to examine critically the spaces of aid and development at the site of geopolitical violence and neoliberal economic engagement where economies of desperation meet economies of desire. The lack of personal service amenities, health care, economic stability, and global mobility that are characteristic of postwar spaces such as Afghanistan are not experienced or embodied by most internationals who live in manufactured quasi-cosmopolitan environments (also see Hyndman 2000). Spatial removals from the daily inputs necessary to socially reproduce oneself or commute from home to work are therefore not fully understood by many in the (un)commonwealth. The (un)commonwealth, by virtue of their legitimate sovereignty and economic status, experience a flexible mobility to “escape” Afghanistan. In the country, the exclusive spaces of the aid and development elite spatially segregate the “everyday” lives of Afghans.

Spatial proximity, and lack thereof, remains an essential component of displaced development and aid; however, breaking down these physical barriers will not solve the entire epistemological processes that continue to place Afghans into a narrow and orientalist categorization of the two-thirds-world “other.” For example,
several popular quasi-nonfiction memoirs (such as The Bookseller of Kabul and The Kabul Beauty School) authored by one-third-world individuals who lived closely with Afghans have also oriented and misunderstood Afghanistan due to lack of information and training as well as interpreting their personal experiences through a narrow lens of one-third-world modernity and occidental epistemologies.

The embodied experiences and movements of unequal assistance, development, reconstruction, and security reproduce cyclical benefits to many one-third-world individuals and organizations working and living in these temporally limited, postwar conflict, and capital gain zones. These sovereign bodies actively maintain aid and development ideologies that assist the structural networks of sovereign state power, militarism, and enormously unbalanced economies. For example, all respondents were eager to critique the structural problems with international aid and development and privatization; however, most removed themselves as agents of change regarding this structure and conversely identified their work as “necessary” for Afghanistan to “move forward.” In these cases, geopolitical dissonance oils the engine of capital accumulation for those profiting from the economies of postwar conflict.

Conversely, the (un)commonwealth also includes fissures in the structures of neoliberal policy-driven development. There are one-third-world internationals collaborating, living, and working with Afghans, outside of the normative development and aid industry and within Afghan culture, language, and social contexts. Several have also left large aid and development organizations to start projects that counter macroscale development and aid philosophies and praxis.

Postwar conflict aid and development are crucial areas of study for geographers, because peace-building through aid and development remains within the bellicose economies and geopolitics of sovereign bodies and sites of exception. Field-based qualitative analyses such as those discussed in this article are necessary to expand critical geographies of “peace-building” and their increasingly interconnected reliance on war, violent conflict, corruption, and other informal economies such as narcotics and sex trafficking. As this article argues, the places and actors in peace “building” and postwar aid and development are intricately interconnected and woven into the fabric of war’s economic enterprise and opportunities. Deconstructing these geographies of power and inequity requires additional research and attention from critical geographers.

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Notes

1. To ensure the confidentiality of the responses and information provided for this study, pseudonyms are used for each participant and their affiliations are not included.
2. This sample size does not represent an accurate percentage of gender within the international community. The majority of international workers are male, particularly in the private sector such as contract workers, logistics, and military and security personnel. This sample size was based on my own positionality as a female researcher and the willingness of respondents to participate in this study.
3. I define the training as profoundly lacking as respondents answered none or I received a dos/don’t sheet to the question “Please describe (length and content of) the training you received prior to and/or after your arrival in Afghanistan.” Several respondents did outside reading, which largely consisted of fiction (i.e., The Kite Runner).
4. Warlord ownership of property was discussed by many RPs (also see Wily 2003; World Bank 2005).

References


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