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# Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security



# Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security

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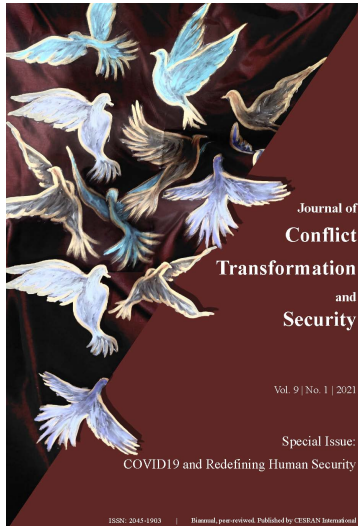
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### ARTICLES

7

**Editor's Introduction to the Special Issue On the Protracted Crisis in Afghanistan - Decolonial Perspectives**

By Susanne Schmeidl and Mujib Abid

12

**Cultural Biases in Contemporary U.S. Afghan Policy**

By Morwari Zafar

26

**Failing to Decolonise Knowledge Production in the Periphery: The Compromise of Afghan Research and Higher Education 2001-2021**

By Jeremy Simpson

42

**Taliban Performativity through the Distortive Orientalist Looking Glass**

By Sepi Azerbaijani-Moghaddam

57

**Beyond *Watan*: Valency of Place among a Fragmented Afghanistan Diaspora**

By Zarlisht Sarwari

### INTERVIEW

69

**Interview with Hamid Parafshan and Omer Sabore**

By Mujib Abid

### BOOK REVIEWS

76

Omar Sadr

**Negotiating Cultural Diversity in Afghanistan**

By Mejgan Massoumi

82

**My Pen is the Wing of a Bird. New Fiction by Afghan Women**  
&

Andrea Chiovenda

**Crafting Masculine Selves: Culture, War, and Psychodynamics in Afghanistan**

By Sari Kouvo

### ARTISTIC INTERVENTIONS

89

**Art as Hope, Art as Refuge, Art to Give Voice: Suffering and Hopes of Women in Afghanistan**

By Tamana Barakzai

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## Taliban Performativity through the Distortive Orientalist Looking Glass

Sepi Azerbaijani-Moghaddam\*

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### ABSTRACT

*Abstract: This article uses theory of performativity to analyse the violence of subaltern groups such as the Taliban in order to reveal nuances missed by mainstream analytical approaches. Taking a postcolonial approach, it exposes us-versus-them binaries in the mobilization of knowledge and creation of narratives for the purpose of delegitimization and Othering. From their emergence, the Taliban, faced with a growing international backlash, contested the role to which they had been relegated to as a result of an Orientalist reading. Their characterization followed hegemonic narratives that historically limited the Taliban to unruly Afghan Islamists, the ultimate retrogressive Other, the Muslim fanatics of the colonial, imperial past. An examination of the Taliban's performative violence in creating their 'imagined geography', the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, should lead to questions about the identity of 'knowledge communities', the subalterns they choose to exclude, and the need to decolonize the production of knowledge.*

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**Keywords:** Taliban, performativity, violence, Orientalism, Subaltern, space, postcolonialism, imagined geography

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**Biographical Note:** Sepi Azerbaijani-Moghaddam is a social scientist and researcher with 30 years' experience consulting in conflict/post-conflict settings. Oxford graduate and PhD candidate at the University of St Andrews, writing on Taliban identity and performativity. In the 1990s, she worked with communities across Afghanistan, regularly negotiating access with Mujahideen and Taliban commanders. Post-Taliban, she worked on capacity building emerging civil society groups. She has worked at senior level on gender issues with donors and multinationals. She advised the British military command in Southern Afghanistan (counterinsurgency) and more recently, NATO (WPS). Recently, she has worked with national clients (Ministry of Interior, Martyrs and Disabled, etc.). Her publications include some landmark reports on a range of topics.

## Introduction

The Taliban movement, which first emerged in the 1990s, and returned to power in Afghanistan on 15 August 2021, has frequently been stereotyped and associated with specific narrow visual and narrative representations in media, commentary and literature, as simultaneously primitive, hyper-masculine, aggressive, childlike, and effeminate.<sup>1</sup> This persistent Othering of the Taliban through an Orientalist lens in mainstream narratives, together with perceptions that they are not Afghan but rather creations/servants of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), has often prevented deeper examination of a complex movement. In this article, I argue that the Taliban's often performative and violent transformation of public spaces as part of a contestation of a subaltern identity, which signals a postcolonial stance, has been one of the least understood or studied. This article focuses on the Taliban's everyday and more spectacular performative violence in a number of key events and spaces between 1996 and 2001. Ghazi Sports Stadium in Kabul, for example, is still more often associated with Taliban executions<sup>2</sup> rather than a sports venue. Similarly, Bibi Mahro Swimming Pool in Kabul has become part of urban myth as the site of Taliban executions. The narratives associated with Taliban violence in these locations added to the Taliban's enduring notoriety years after their regime was toppled.

Combining theoretical frameworks of performativity and postcolonialism, I aim to present a picture that contrasts with an exogenously assumed and projected Taliban identity, outlining a movement capable of performative subversion and contestation to construct a complex identity that responds to diverse forms of 'colonization' and subalternity, particularly in controlling a 'power-knowledge' nexus. Drawing on a partly auto-ethnographic account based on extensive experience in Afghanistan since 1995, I offer a different perspective on the Taliban, showing

how the entrenched, hegemonic narratives presented in Western scholarship and media at the time created critical blind spots in the study of certain groups in Afghan society.

## Theoretical Framework

The Taliban performatively contested Orientalism's imagined imperialist and colonial geographies and their subaltern status within them partly by reclaiming and repurposing Afghanistan's physical terrain. From their emergence in 1994, they have done this by performing 'Talibanized' spaces in progressively grandiose and reactionary ways, mostly in urban areas, notably Kabul. As a result, certain sites, contested by being repurposed for Taliban use, became indelibly associated with them through the emotions evoked in the audiences they gathered.

In postcolonial theory, subaltern describes social groups and lower social classes that constitute the Other - marginalized and existing in a space of difference.<sup>3</sup> The term subaltern identifies and designates those segments of colonial populations who are geographically, politically, and socially excluded from the power hierarchy of an imperial colony and the empire's metropolitan homeland. Metropolitan cultures, including the cultures of colonized elites, protect their powers and privileges<sup>4</sup> in a number of ways including the insistence that "the subaltern cannot speak", referring to Spivak's seminal postcolonial text. Using a postcolonial lens, specifically Orientalism, allows questions to be raised about the basis for generating knowledge about the Taliban movement, demonstrating how specific types of representation, downplaying agency and performative force by utilizing stereotypes, have been normalized.

Part of the process of Othering is to deny voice, especially to groups that challenge hegemonic narratives. Cultural imperialism has the power to disqualify or erase the knowledge of certain populations, or segments thereof, considered low on the social hierarchy.<sup>5</sup> In this way, troublesome groups can be denigrated, dismissed or erased. Adopting the prism of

<sup>1</sup> Hein Kiessling, *Unity, Faith and Discipline*

<sup>2</sup> Miglani, "Taliban executions still haunt Afghan soccer field", 13 September 2008

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghan-stadium-idUSSP12564220080913> (Accessed 15 July 2022)

<sup>3</sup> Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

<sup>4</sup> D. Gregory, *The Colonial Present*

<sup>5</sup> Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"



Othering reveals how, before the arrival of mobile phones and internet connectivity<sup>6</sup> in Afghanistan, the Taliban were bereft of a means of communicating with and transmitting their narratives and meanings to a global audience.

### ***Deploying the Orientalist Lens***

Orientalism is a form of representation: a "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and... 'the Occident' and is considered a foundational document of postcolonialism explaining a powerful political instrument of domination".<sup>7</sup> Orientalism provides an essential analytical framework for understanding cultural representations of groups like the Taliban as portrayed in Western literature and mass media. The underpinning concept is that the generation of representations based on the binary are mutually constitutive social constructs, as each exists because of the Other. In service of the colonial variant of imperialism, the Orientalist paradigm allowed for cultural representations that depicted these societies as primitive, irrational, violent, despotic, fanatical and essentially inferior to westerners and their indigenous informants or the metropolitan elites and proxies they supported. Societies, or segments of them, could then be essentialized as static and undeveloped, reactionary, and traditional, awaiting enlightenment through contemporary and progressive ideas provided by Westerners. In contrast to this Oriental Other, Western Europe was superior, civil, progressive, and rational.<sup>8</sup>

In Orientalism, Said utilizes both Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony and Foucault's discourse on power-knowledge relations (the power to fabricate meanings, to represent others as Other) to establish an intellectual binary relationship that allows Occidentals and their proxies to claim definitive knowledge of the Orient and to colonize the people and geographies therein.<sup>9</sup> The power-knowledge binary is essential to understanding colonialism and the power to imagine

geographies and to assign identities to the people in those spaces. The power-knowledge nexus is the locus of the Taliban's struggle to escape their subaltern status and to explain their situation through performative violence in the 1990s, in order to create new 'space'.

An Orientalist vantage point on Afghanistan has historically allowed for a shift in the balance and practice of power, entitling Western countries to intervene, usually through a compliant elite, militarily or through the provision of development aid, 'saving' or 'empowering' people while furthering multiple agendas. Attitudes towards the Frontier regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan, for example, are still dominated by British ethnographic accounts to the present day and local elites have adopted this prism for viewing those labelled 'traditional' and 'rural', often interpreted as 'backward'<sup>10</sup>. As a result, the production of knowledge has remained colonized and biased to some extent, "usually muted, tamed, and incorporated within hegemonic frames"<sup>11</sup>, while subaltern voices have been silenced.

Narratives of Othering have been an insidious constant of alienation in Afghanistan, justifying the seizing of power based on control of armies, state funds, ethnicity, tribal background, land ownership, religious background, since the 1950s - rural-urban location, literacy and ability to speak English, since the 1990s - the ability to mobilize specific types of vocabulary favoured by the international development community, and, since 2001 - direct access to the international media, military, donor and diplomatic communities and the skilful mobilization of victim narratives. A myriad of Afghan identities often grind against each other in contestation for legitimacy and authority, seeking to gain the upper hand over opposing groups, to exclude and disenfranchise them. Compliant Afghan elites have mobilized the hierarchy to consistently Other opponents, leading at best to exclusion and denial of voice and at worst to incarceration and death. Othering has become an innate feature of political and public life resulting in an increasingly brittle polity

<sup>6</sup> Mobile phones arrived in 2002 and internet connectivity slightly later.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 10

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Kolsky, "The Colonial Rule of Law and the Legal Regime of Exception"

<sup>11</sup> Juris, "Violence Performed and Imagined"

projected through a highly fractured lens, a bewildering 'multiverse' of subaltern actors, ideologies, identities, narratives and histories.

The mobilization of the concept of the Other requires "imagined geographies", a term coined by Edward Said as a component of Orientalism, referring to the perception of a space created through certain imagery, texts, and/or discourses, specifically for the Western gaze. A recent example is the insistence of Westerners and their proteges on presenting distinct suburbs of Kabul as somehow representative of the whole of Afghanistan, in all its diversity and complexity. The analysis of imagined geographies is important in dispelling "us-versus-them" binaries in the study of history, as well as for challenging "public cultures of assumption, disposition and action"<sup>12</sup>, by exposing asymmetrical systems of power, knowledge, and geography. Within the Orientalist purview, Afghanistan's imagined geographies are overlaid fragments in strata of colonial, neocolonial, postcolonial and imperialist histories<sup>13</sup>, a highly complex mosaic of spatial and temporal imaginaries, reflecting the foreign ideologies and often constructed identities of elites, given meaning by or for the benefit largely of the Western gaze, at times for the process of evoking and maintaining subsidies and largesse.

### ***Taliban as the Subaltern Other***

A study of the Taliban as subaltern and Other is required in any discussion of the construction of their identity through performativity. The Taliban emerged from combinations of groupings – generally rural, refugee, madrasa-educated, devout Muslims. Generally they did not come from elite tribes or families, the intelligentsia, famous Mujahideen commanders, and the urbanised. A history of Othering had created many subaltern groups in Afghan society long before the Soviet invasion. The removal of the monarchy in the 1973 coup and of the traditional ruling classes in the 1978 revolution, together with the disorder and war which followed, allowed many subaltern groups to assert themselves, often using weapons and violence. These included new religious groupings and some aspiring to

religiosity that had historically had to defer to the aristocracy and tribal leaders. Some were mobilized with Saudi and US funding and became a new elite and prominent figures within Mujahideen factions.

Even famous Mujahideen leaders were at times the subalterns of those who funded, trained, and guided them. Internationally, the Mujahideen provided the mute faces, rugged warriors carrying weapons against a backdrop of mountains, on posters usually entitled 'freedom fighters'. They even provided an epic backdrop to the Cold War heroics of Rambo and James Bond. For the media, as long as they were fighting the 'godless Communists', they were the 'good guys' facing the Soviet Goliath, but very few in the audience generally understood or cared about their aims beyond that. This attitude meant that after the Soviet withdrawal, the fall of the Communist government and a rapidly cobbled together Mujahideen government, Western powers disengaged. The result was a bloody civil war.

From their first appearance in 1994, the Taliban grappled with the violent and lawless aftermath of the war with the Soviets - fiefdoms run by hierarchies of squabbling Mujahideen commanders and straggling militias formed by the Communists.<sup>14</sup> Violence had become an increasingly grim background soundtrack to Afghan lives since the late seventies, but its full extent was not always captured by the all-important and dominant Western gaze. The Taliban rejected the Mujahideen's subaltern identity, as 'noble savages' while assisting the West in its adventure against the Soviets, and affirmed the movement's genesis in the plight of ordinary Afghans struggling to survive and longing for security.<sup>15</sup>

During the *jihad*, Mujahideen leaders used *madrasa* student fronts or *taliban* as cannon fodder on the frontlines.<sup>16</sup> The latter had no say in military or political affairs and in the end, they watched as the theocracy they had been promised failed to materialise. Even by assuming the name 'Taliban', the movement acknowledged its initial status as subaltern to

<sup>12</sup> D. Gregory, *The Colonial Present*

<sup>13</sup> M. Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination*

<sup>14</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: militant Islam, oil, and fundamentalism in Central Asia*

<sup>15</sup> Kathy Gannon, *I is for Infidel*

<sup>16</sup> David B. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age*

the subalterns in search of *their own* 'imagined geography'. By rising up and taking power to continue on the path to the promised Emirate - the initial rationale for taking up arms against the Soviet-backed Communist government - the Taliban were finishing what the Mujahideen failed to complete. The international community and many Afghans expected the Taliban to fit Mujahideen stereotypes. Once the Taliban seized Kabul, however, their violent performativity increased but the usual frameworks for analysis and the distorting foreign media lens, which had already shifted focus in search of 'Islamic terror', were inadequate to the task of explaining their actions and they were generally dismissed as anachronistic savages.

The media and development agencies, part of the few representatives of the West remaining in Afghanistan at the time, had near exclusive control of the narrative, as the extant 'knowledge community'. They also controlled the "means of symbolic distribution".<sup>17</sup> From their emergence in 1994, rather than in-depth studies, the Taliban were introduced to Western audiences through the media, in the form of sensationalized 'tabloid realism'<sup>18</sup> related to their treatment of women, closure of girls schools and destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas. Persistent reductionist interpretations of the Taliban's actions as 'Pushtun', 'rural' and 'madrasa educated', the latter characterized as 'backward', 'savage' and 'medieval', Othered the Taliban as irrelevant relics and led to their gradual isolation.

Taliban actions were frequently decontextualized and placed within hegemonic narratives in order to marginalize them as what could only be described as the spontaneous and violent acts of a backward, draconian regime. Ultimately, the Taliban failed to wrest the power-knowledge nexus from the grip of the international media. Calculated performative violence, for maximum effect to stabilize a country ravaged by decades of conflict, was reduced by the distortive media lens to the incomprehensible brutality of savage fundamentalists. A series of

assumptions and urban myths about the Taliban were at times touted as facts. When the Taliban stepped outside the boundaries of exogenous, predefined identities and activities, it was simply attributed to their being backward or irrational.

### ***Spatial Configuration and Visual Propaganda***

The Taliban, in a hurry to communicate to a shell shocked and unstable population, were using visual propaganda to spread their messages. Images are a more emotive and effective means of influencing the public, because humans "process images more quickly than text, making images more emotionally visceral and responses to images frequently more immediate and powerful than responses to text".<sup>19</sup> Repetition is also important in visual propaganda to convey messages to the masses<sup>20</sup> and to "accumulate a degree of performative force if it is repeatedly invoked, reasserted and rearticulated".<sup>21</sup> The Taliban used spatial configuration to remind people of their power relations, constantly impressing the imminence of punishment. The Taliban had an uncanny ability to use space for performative force: "Space, how it is constructed, what is used to decorate it, and how it is used, are all important in establishing authority and projecting power and in moulding people's outlooks and values".<sup>22</sup>

Spatial configuration appeared in the form of smashed televisions and streamers of video and audio cassette tapes festooning many metal frameworks, constructed to hold banners on roads where the Taliban had checkpoints. The disembowelled objects were a constant visual reminder of the Taliban's puritanical ban on many forms of entertainment. It reinforced their performative power alongside the visual of their armed foot soldiers manning checkpoints, signalling their coercive power. Shock effects were created around public executions, when people were shown dead bodies, mutilated body parts or enacted

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey Alexander, *Performance and Power*

<sup>18</sup> M. Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination*  
Mainstream publishers produced approximately three books on the Taliban before 2001

<sup>19</sup> Carol Winkler et al., *Visual Propaganda and Extremism in the Online Environment*, 9

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda*

<sup>21</sup> Michael Glass et al., *Performativity, Politics, and the Production of Social Space*, 13

<sup>22</sup> Graeme J. Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*, 12

violence. Visual information also elicits higher rates of information recall than auditory or textual channels.<sup>23</sup> This performative violence in public spaces frightened people, attached new and intense emotions to the spaces where events occurred and contributed to an enduring Taliban myth.

### Performativity

Discourses establish an actor's place in the world as he constructs it, and provide frameworks of meaning within which the actor can think and act.<sup>24</sup> Performativity, based on the work of philosopher, Judith Butler, is an important theoretical framework for exploring the early years of Taliban rule. For Butler, the political "subject" only comes into being or is gradually constructed-whether individually or collectively-in the performative act of political reiteration. By reiterating the "performative enactment of particular social norms"<sup>25</sup> which came to be specifically associated with them, the Taliban gradually developed attributes as sovereign subjects. Prior to specific political actions, the Taliban did not exist as 'the Taliban' and could have become just another Mujahideen group. Thus the Taliban were constituted in and through these actions (e.g. blowing up the Bamiyan Buddhas) and the subsequent reactions of their various 'audiences', which set them apart from previous Mujahideen factions. They clearly demonstrate Butler's "conception of performativity [as opening] up the radical possibility for political agency by illustrating how social norms can be challenged through performative acts of material-discursive rearticulation".<sup>26</sup>

Using theory of performativity to examine the Taliban's use of violence in 'becoming' reveals how they were, at times, reconstructing meaning around what it meant for the movement to be, for example, extremist Muslims, the most common frame of reference used by Western and Westernised commentators to describe them. Such

commentators assumed social norms, drawn from Orientalist, hegemonic and at times superficial interpretations of what it meant to be an extremist Muslim, 'doing' *jihad* (being a *mujahid*), being *madrassa*-educated, and so on, interchangeable with words such as backward, conservative, uneducated or medieval in a pejorative sense. Texts often juxtaposed these words with the Taliban's assumed constitutive frames of reference. The next section touches on how the Taliban's actions can be interpreted as creating new meanings associated with these aspects of their identity.

### Power and Performance - Cultural Pragmatics

Jeffrey Alexander, a cultural sociologist, uses the theory of cultural pragmatics, within the frame of performativity, to examine how actors create cultural or social performances, that demonstrate "the social process[es] by which [they], individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation"<sup>27</sup>. Alexander's theory is critical in revealing the Taliban's attempts at creating new meanings and 'explaining their situation' through their violent performances of power and space as well as the challenges they faced in doing so. Meaning is conveyed through 'authentic' performance. This, in turn, is achieved through what Alexander calls cultural pragmatics, combining elements of social and cultural performance, such as collective representations of background symbols, strategic audience selection and demonstrated power to construct social performance.

Furthermore, when analysing Taliban actions, it is necessary to differentiate between coercive power and performative power. Alexander explains that performing power must be successful for social actors to be credible to their intended audience. For example, Mujahideen factions demonstrated coercive power through the excessive use of heavy weaponry in civilian areas. By 2001, the Taliban had mastered performative violence to such an extent that they had totally eclipsed all Mujahideen groups despite relying on less violence. To date, even the memory of Taliban actions in certain locations continues to fill people with dread. Power cannot be made or

<sup>23</sup> Carol Winkler et al., *Visual Propaganda and Extremism in the Online Environment*

<sup>24</sup> A. Klotz et al., *Strategies for Research in Constructivist International Relations*

<sup>25</sup> Michael Glass et al., *Performativity, Politics, and the Production of Social Space*

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey Alexander, *Performance and Power*, 28

sustained through action alone, but is “subject to the rigors of performance”. By this Alexander means “the need for power to constantly “iterate” background narratives and codes”<sup>28</sup>, including sustaining “a productive relation to all the other elements of performance”.<sup>29</sup> Examining some of the well-known events which took place under Taliban rule reveals their ability to control these elements of performing power, while iterating narratives and codes linked to Islam and episodes in Afghan history.

### Traditional/Modern Binary

The Taliban emerged as a modern movement anchoring their actions in the cultural and religious structures from which they emerged, while developing a postcolonial script that contested their subaltern status as warriors who had fought a *jihad* against the Soviets only to be denied the promised emirate. Alexander differentiates between the traditional and the modern in order to explain ‘authenticity’ in delivering a performance. Following Foucault’s argument that people are not subjects but actors, Alexander argues that “people anchor their actions in culture structures, but they continuously script their lines of actions in pragmatic and meaningfully distinctive ways”<sup>30</sup>. Alexander’s theory is useful not only because it discusses differences in meaning-making in traditional and modern contexts, but also because it shows how, for analysts using an Orientalist interpretive lens, Taliban performativity was glaringly at odds with the latter’s perceptions and understanding of Islamic and Pushtun cultural norms. Meanwhile, the Taliban were performing new meanings as they faced challenges to their evolving identity in a complex modern context.

In performing power and space, the Taliban selected elements from a variety of repertoires which they fused together – Pushtun, madrasa-educated, Muslim, Mujahideen, rural, etc. Wishing to confine the Taliban to a traditional frame and not understanding that a modern reworking was being witnessed, many commentators have consistently claimed that they had corrupted the ‘correct’ forms of Islam or Pushtun culture, because they were illiterate

Pushtun peasants in some explanations, and/or madrasa brainwashed boys who had been ripped from ordinary family life, in others. In such critiques, there was no possibility that Taliban performativity did not follow anticipated scripts because the audience was witnessing a re-fusion of ‘traditional’ elements and a reworking of standard scripts.

### Contestation and Performativity

The Taliban, as subalterns, redeployed dominant hegemonic codes, predominantly from Islam, as part of their performance of subversion, contestation, and revision of the power-knowledge binary, in and through public spaces. They contested Western neo-liberal notions of governance and statehood. They contested previous accommodations between Islam and state and being left with no emirate, having made tremendous sacrifices in their *jihad* against the Soviets. Alexander’s praxis approach points to “sites of contestation where performance of resistance and subversion are understood to flourish in the ceremonial and interactional practices of the marginalized, the enslaved, and the subaltern”.<sup>31</sup> This approach rejects culture as text and argues that subaltern groups such as the Taliban ““create a culture of resistance,” a “subjugated knowledge” that must be conceptualized not as a discourse but as “a repertoire of performance practices””.<sup>32</sup> Culture as a “repertoire of practices”, reformulated in an embodied and experiential form, is often “wholly unrecognizable to members of the dominant culture”, hence the accusation that the Taliban, for example, do not have complete knowledge of Islam. The point of the reformulation, frequently missed by the hostile Orientalist lens, is to “reclaim, short-circuit, and resignify” the hegemonic code’s “signed imperatives”.<sup>33</sup>

### Performative Violence

By constructing their identity through performative violence, and perceiving themselves as just and moral avengers,<sup>34</sup> the

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 89

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 5

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 21

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 21

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 21

<sup>34</sup> Carol Winkler et al., *Visual Propaganda and Extremism in the Online Environment*. The authors



Taliban crossed the line from Mujahideen faction in 1994 to terrorists by 2001. Some of their notable spectacles involved commentary on grievances or injustices related to the situation of the Afghan people since the arrival of the Communist government and the Soviet army, and the inability of the international community and Mujahideen factions to create stability and a promised theocracy. Lack of in-depth analysis of their performative violence fits within the discourses of postcolonialism, where “historically, all the indigenous peoples and other national groups who have resisted state conquest and oppression have been denounced and vilified by those states as ‘savages’ and ‘terrorists’”.<sup>35</sup> In the case of the Taliban, their resistance and contestation have been described by “dominant media frames”<sup>36</sup> as evidence of savagery rather than violent performances expressive of identities, styles and practices rooted in opposition.<sup>37</sup>

After the Soviet withdrawal, the international community left Afghans to ‘bare life’. The war against the Soviets disrupted the social order through, among other things, the proliferation of small arms, the abandonment of heavy weaponry, land grabbing and criminality, creating a chaotic, violent situation which would eventually necessitate the rise of the Taliban movement who attempted to stabilize it.<sup>38</sup> The Taliban’s origin story sees them emerging as vigilantes rising to fight Mujahideen depravity at local behest in Kandahar,<sup>39</sup> acting to end the plight of Afghans become Agamben’s *homo sacer*, a position “conferred by archaic Roman law upon those who could not be sacrificed according to ritual (because...their deaths were of no value to the gods) but who could be killed with impunity (because they were outside juridical law)”.<sup>40</sup> *Homo sacer* lives:

“at the point where sovereign power suspends the law, whose absence thus falls over a zone not merely of exclusion but of abandonment. ...

This space is produced through a speech-act, or more accurately a decision in the sense of ‘a cut in life’, that is at once performative and paradoxical. It is performative because it draws a boundary between politically qualified life and merely existent life exposed and abandoned to violence: ‘bare life’”.<sup>41</sup>

Once Afghanistan descended into civil war, Afghans were abandoned to become *homo sacer* by departed neo-imperialist patrons who had no further use for them. Fanon argued that such people should not be bound by principles that apply to humanity in their attitude towards those seen to represent the (dis)interest of the masters.<sup>42</sup> In some respects, reflecting Fanon’s defence of the use of violence by the subaltern to gain independence, the Taliban emerged as a movement that felt compelled to embrace ‘counter-violence’ to bring stability to Kandahar and beyond. Simultaneously, to shock people into obedience after years of acclimatization to alarming levels of carnage, the Taliban had to transcend the norms of violence to which people had become desensitized.

Within the framework of performativity, acts of Taliban violence can be perceived as instances of seeking “to produce social transformation by staging symbolic rituals of confrontation”.<sup>43</sup> The performative quality of the Taliban’s violent acts, with their attendant narratives, must be emphasized within systems of “cultural and material structure”.<sup>44</sup> Performative, “non-verbal, spectacular forms of iconic display”<sup>45</sup> go beyond kinetic acts to create an ‘opportunity space’, that provides a wealth of messaging that eclipse passive symbolism.<sup>46</sup> The shock or hiatus of the moment of violent impact is the ‘opportunity space’ where actors using performative violence insert their own values and create a critical arena for the performance of an evolving identity.

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analyse revenge as a common and popular theme in Jihadi propaganda.

<sup>35</sup> Sluka, “Terrorism and Taboo”, 168

<sup>36</sup> Juris, “Violence Performed and Imagined”

<sup>37</sup> Peteet, ‘Male Gender and Rituals of Resistance in the Palestinian Intifada’

<sup>38</sup> David B. Edwards *Heroes of the Age*

<sup>39</sup> Kathy Gannon, *I is for Infidel*

<sup>40</sup> Gregory, “The black flag”, 406

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 406

<sup>42</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The wretched of the earth*

<sup>43</sup> Juris, “Violence Performed and Imagined”

<sup>44</sup> B. Schmidt et al., *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*

<sup>45</sup> Juris, “Violence Performed and Imagined”

<sup>46</sup> Neville Bolt, *The Violent Image*

One spectacle which stands out as an example of Taliban performative violence is the display of former President Najibullah's corpse. An examination of this grim spectacle demonstrates the power of the Taliban's performative violence in their early years. In a photograph<sup>47</sup> published the day after the Taliban took Kabul in late September 1996, two young Taliban foot soldiers hug each other with joyful faces under the grotesquely deformed and bloodied figures of Najibullah and his brother, hanging from a traffic light pole in Aryana Square. The bodies, castrated as a further expression of their powerlessness in the Taliban's masculinised public sphere, were left hanging for three days. The Taliban used the corpses, prominent public figures displayed like a common criminals, as a "means of symbolic production"<sup>48</sup>, mobilizing them as macabre "objects, iconic representations dramatizing and rendering vivid the invisible motives and morals they were trying to represent".<sup>49</sup>

Announcements had been made on the radio so that thousands of people, the 'strategic audience', could gather to watch the scene with shock and dismay. Unlike the majority of Mujahideen commanders, who disposed of victims away from the public gaze, the Taliban treated the president's body with shocking performative violence. The spectacle of Najibullah's corpse was the first of many, designed to cow the population of Kabul into submission and to set up the Taliban as Islamic arbiters of justice and morality for what they saw as a profligate urban setting – performatively creating an 'opportunity space' to display the outcome of their violent act and to construct narratives as social actors who consciously or unconsciously have meanings which they want others to believe.<sup>50</sup>

Utilizing temporal sequencing, i.e. the morning after the Taliban arrived in Kabul, and the choice of space, completed the *mis en scene*.

Indeed, the killing and display of the corpse of the last Communist president was the Taliban's brutal and very public message to the people of Kabul on the first morning of their rule in the city - that the Taliban were not even going to make exceptions for a fellow Pushtun or a president, punished as revenge for those killed by the Communists. Performing the space, displaying Najibullah's grisly end can be interpreted as the Taliban symbolically killing the last protégé and vestige of Communist rule and Soviet influence, finally ending the war the Mujahideen had started, in the way they believed it should have ended. Instead the Mujahideen had allowed Najibullah, their enemy until the collapse of the Communist government in 1992, to be kept safe in a United Nations compound. Hence, it can also be surmised that with this bloody, symbolic act, the domination of non-Muslims (including the United Nations) and a colonization of sorts was at an end and Islamic rule, the long awaited theocracy, had finally been installed.

The Taliban chose the location of King Amanullah's monuments to Afghan Independence from colonizers, Aryana Square, at a crossroads at the heart of Kabul's historic centre, to display the body of President Najibullah, the last Communist ruler of Afghanistan. Aryana square is very close to the Arg, a fortress-palace built by another king, Abdur Rahman, the "Iron Amir" (between 1840 and 1844 – 1 October 1901). He was not afraid of brutality and built the foundations of the modern Afghan state. The Arg was constructed after the Bala Hissar fortress was destroyed by British Indian troops during the second Anglo-Afghan War in 1880.<sup>51</sup> The location of the Taliban's spectacle was possibly another nod to Afghan kings, one who hammered the Afghan state in place and one who threw off the colonial yoke.

Since their return to power in 2021, the Taliban is tapping into other codes and symbols. These are linked to the Taliban's, and in particular Haqqani's, 'killing machines'<sup>52</sup>,

<sup>47</sup> Irish Times, "Ex president hanged by Taliban after fall of Kabul", 28 September 1996  
<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ex-president-hanged-by-taliban-after-fall-of-kabul-1.90501>  
(accessed 31 August, 2021)

<sup>48</sup> Jeffrey Alexander, *Performance and Power*

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> Woodburn et al., "From the Bala Hissar to the Arg"

<sup>52</sup> Carter et al., "Haqqani leader turned network into 'killing machine,' intelligence officials say", 7 September 2012  
<https://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/07/world/asia/>

such as elite fighter units and suicide bombers for complex attacks, both employing performative violence to turn public spaces into terror zones. Their performances on arrival in Kabul in August 2021 involved their special forces, the elite Badri 313 unit,<sup>53</sup> a well-equipped force, not clad in traditional attire, but superficially mirroring special forces units from other parts of the world. Images of the Badri soldiers challenged descriptions of the Taliban as 'medieval' since the uniform, weaponry and posture (e.g. resting finger trigger position) belied a selective process of engaging with modernity.

Additionally, in late 2021, Sirajuddin Haqqani – leader of the powerful and feared Haqqani faction in the Taliban, and now interior minister – met with the families of suicide bombers in a formal gathering,<sup>54</sup> where he praised their sacrifices and gifted them land and money. Suicide bombing, supremely performative violence, which once again had had the impact of altering many public spaces into scenes of terror and carnage, was a key part of the Taliban's campaign against previous government. In stark contrast to Haqqani's act, the previous regime rarely publicly acknowledged the deaths and sacrifices of their ordinary soldiers and police, let alone their families – they were literally cannon fodder. The government had even hidden casualty figures for a while to avoid demoralising the nation. Haqqani's meeting performatively legitimized and valorised the violent martyrdom of the suicide bombers.

### **Space and Performativity**

The Taliban employed 'spatial practices', performing the space of the newly created Islamic Emirate as they perceived it, with

violence adding 'performative force'.<sup>55</sup> Following Butler's theory, space is created through performances and as a performative articulation of power.<sup>56</sup> Gregory discussing spatial practices, echoes the link between performativity and space as "an effect of practices of representation, valorization, and articulation...fabricated through and in these practices and...thus not only a domain but also a "doing"". <sup>57</sup> The importance of reworking the public sphere in this manner is "the truly revolutionary process in social change",<sup>58</sup> restructuring the bases of social and public life. It is the mise-en-scene of cultural pragmatics, 'spatial choreography' creating new meaning and expressing power<sup>59</sup>. The giant, gaping niches where the Buddha statues once stood are perhaps the most monumental and startling testament to Taliban determination to alter the historic landscape of Afghanistan. The effect was to create Taliban territory through performative power.

Since "the production of social space is the material-discursive effect of performative practices",<sup>60</sup> the Taliban understood that to have impact they would have to surpass the issuance of edicts, something the Mujahideen had pursued with little effect. Each edict was violently enforced by the Taliban adding performative force by shocking the audience. For example, the Taliban issued edicts banning many types of entertainment. It was, however, the smashed TVs dangling at Taliban checkpoints,<sup>61</sup> resembling blinded eyes, cassette and video ribbons flying in the wind, like the entrails of eviscerated creatures, executed and displayed as trophies, that acted as symbolic geographic markers of Taliban rule. These were cultural performativity's objects serving as "iconic representations to help them dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and morals they [were] trying

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[pakistan-haqqani-profile/index.html](https://pakistan-haqqani-profile/index.html) (Accessed 25 August 2021)

<sup>53</sup> France 24, "Taliban shows off 'special forces' in propaganda blitz", 25 August 2021 <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210825-taliban-shows-off-special-forces-in-propaganda-bltz> (Accessed 30 August 2021)

<sup>54</sup> Reuters, "Taliban praise suicide bombers", 21 October 2021 <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-praise-suicide-bombers-offer-families-cash-land-2021-10-20/> (Accessed 30 October 2021)

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<sup>55</sup> Michael Glass et al., *Performativity, Politics, and the Production of Social Space*

<sup>56</sup> N. Gregson et al., "Taking Butler elsewhere"

<sup>57</sup> D. Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 19

<sup>58</sup> Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*

<sup>59</sup> Alexander, *Performance and Power*

<sup>60</sup> Michael Glass et al., *Performativity, Politics, and the Production of Social Space*

<sup>61</sup> From 1996 to 2001 working in Taliban controlled areas I saw these everywhere.

to represent”.<sup>62</sup> The use of space for violent punishment for perceived infractions had the effect of creating a metanarrative of rough but effective justice and a Taliban ‘territory of moral authority’.<sup>63</sup>

An extraordinary spectacle which was not violent but captures the Taliban’s spatial choreography, and use of objects to create meaning and performative power, occurred in Kandahar in 1996. Mullah Omar removed a holy relic from a shrine in Kandahar, a historic former capital of Afghanistan. This relic was a cloak which Muslims believe belonged to Mohammed, the holy prophet of Islam, who wore it on the famous, miraculous journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, completed in one night, around 621AD. The object was brought to Kandahar in the 18th century from Bukhara by Ahmad Shah Durrani, founder of the Durrani empire, precursor to the modern state of Afghanistan. It is a relic to which miracles are attributed and it is rarely seen, let alone removed from the shrine and displayed. Only kings and rulers of Afghanistan could demand to see the object.

This was spatial choreography with a strategic audience to create new meaning around the identity of the Taliban. By touching this venerated object before a gathered crowd of thousands, the leader of the Taliban was positioning himself in the symbolic line of descent from the Prophet of Islam. Through this act the Taliban broke with the notion of externally conferred legitimacy (through foreign subsidies), as an offshoot of the Mujahideen, and aimed for a different form of legitimacy, bypassing recent history, and linking themselves directly to the Durrani Pushtun kings and their championing of Islam in Afghanistan. Legend has it that Ahmad Shah Durrani held a large tribal gathering which elected him leader. In a similar manner, the Taliban organized a large religious gathering before the spectacle. Mullah Omar was

declared *Amir ul-Mo’menin* (Commander of the Faithful), giving him the Islamic and political authority to lead the Taliban to Kabul and to establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This action stated dramatically that he had not arrived there solely by the power of the gun and that he was not an ordinary leader of a Mujahideen faction. He was claiming moral and religious authority to put his arms in the sleeves of this venerated object. This action henceforth anchored Mullah Omar and the Taliban to the shrine where the cloak is kept.

Interestingly, in August 2021, after entering Kabul, Taliban fighters and leaders referred back to this event when they posed for photos in the Presidential Palace, the Arg, congregating at one point under a painting depicting the crowning of Ahmad Shah Durrani.<sup>64</sup> A very few journalists commented that this action was incongruous with the identity of the Taliban as it had been projected by the international media. It appeared, however, that the Taliban may have been performatively reminding the strategic audience of the symbolic lineage, reaching back to Ahmad Shah Durrani through Mullah Omar’s appearance with the cloak of the prophet.

### ***Performative Contestation of Space***

In the production of identity and difference through contestation “particular stylized performances can...communicate directed messages, such as rejection of the dominant order, or radical confrontation with the symbols of global capitalism and the state”.<sup>65</sup> Ordinary objects can be used to delineate that this place is “other”. One of the most dramatic spectacles of the Taliban in this genre was the 2001 destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues,<sup>66</sup> located in the central highlands of Afghanistan. This event made the Taliban globally notorious. One of the most celebrated

<sup>62</sup> Alexander, *Performance and Power*

<sup>63</sup> Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics*, 3. Gill defines metanarrative as: “a body of discourse which presents a simplified form of the ideology and which is the vehicle of communication between the regime and those who live under it; it is the principal form of cultural mediation between regime and people.”

<sup>64</sup> Wecker, “The painting behind Taliban fighters in Kabul presidential palace is worth a thousand words” 9 September, 2021 <https://religionnews.com/2021/09/09/the-painting-behind-taliban-fighters-in-kabul-presidential-palace-is-worth-a-thousand-words/> (Accessed 10 October 2021)

<sup>65</sup> Juris, “Violence Performed and Imagined”, 421

<sup>66</sup> The final moments of the Buddhas can be seen here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBk5-zRUuNQ&feature=youtu.be>

tourist sites in Afghanistan before the war, the Buddhas were described as priceless artefacts – the largest standing Buddha carvings in the world. In 2000, the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo on the Taliban to pressure them into breaking their ties with Osama Bin Laden and close terrorist training camps in Afghanistan. In response, the Taliban, in keeping with their violent power performances, went for a systematic and spectacular display expressing their subalternity and contestation. Creating a build up to the spectacle, Mullah Omar issued a decree ordering the elimination of all non-Islamic statues and sanctuaries from Afghanistan. The Taliban began smashing Buddhist statues in Kabul Museum from February 2001 onwards and eventually communicated their intention to blow up the Bamiyan Buddhas. Inevitably, there was international outcry in the form of pleas from Muslim religious leaders, letters, delegations, official protests and widespread condemnation, and offers to buy the statues.

The substantial task of destroying the statues in the Bamiyan valley started on March 2, 2001 and took place in stages, over 20 days, using heavy weaponry and eventually dynamite. To ensure an international audience, the 'strategic audience' of cultural performativity, twenty journalists were flown to Bamiyan to witness the destruction and confirm that the two Buddhas had been destroyed. Footage of clouds of dust billowing out of the niches, where two giant Buddha statues had stood watch over the Silk Route winding through the Bamiyan valley for millennia, was transmitted all over the world, as the international community watched in horror and dismay.

The Taliban had sought – unsuccessfully – to obtain acceptance of their regime by the international community, which continued to dictate terms to them, based on decisions the latter had made about the Taliban's actions and identity, viewing them and all groups in Afghanistan as subalterns through the Orientalist lens. This action was the use of symbolic objects and spatial choreography on a grand scale, to create new meaning around a number of issues pertinent to the Taliban's relations with the international community. The 'sacrifice' of the Buddhas can be interpreted as a symbolic act, a grand gesture

of contestation, permanently altering a historical location, symbolising a break with the international system which had rejected them. Also of interest in the story of the Buddhas, in a nod to *homo sacer*, was the comment from a dismayed Taliban official, reported as contrasting the international community's haste to pay millions of dollars to save the Buddha statues to their refusal to provide funding to save starving Afghans afflicted by drought in the same period.<sup>67</sup> This destruction was an assertion of power by spectacle. The gaping Buddha niches are also now associated with the Taliban.

### Concluding Remarks

Examining groups such as the Taliban as facets in a kaleidoscopic and at times problematic Afghan national identity and exploring their reactions to being Othered, reveals some of the entrenched and intrinsic structures of discrimination and Othering in the study of Afghan politics and society. Until recently, Western and Westernised commentators, embedded in Orientalist frameworks have largely been ill equipped to analyse the Taliban beyond rigid and narrow frameworks of 'Muslim', 'Pushtun', 'backwards' and 'medieval'. The Taliban's actions were rooted in processes of contestation and subversion, within the power/knowledge nexus that had relegated Afghans to permanent subaltern status. Groups such as the Taliban were further demoted within a political hierarchy externally imposed on Afghanistan by the very elites who pay and receive foreign subsidies, perpetuating an implicit architecture and hierarchy of Othering. This has obscured much about subaltern groups throughout Afghan history, the Taliban being one of the most recent to be delegitimated. This leads to an unnuanced and hollow analysis of their situation at a given moment, their response and the meanings of their speech-acts. Analysing Taliban violence through theoretical frameworks such as performativity provides deeper insights into the identity of the movement and similar movements. Using a distorting Orientalist lens reduces all their actions to the incomprehensible rage and brutality of savage fundamentalists – particularly in the 1990s,

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<sup>67</sup> Centlivres, "The Controversy over the Buddhas of Bamiyan"



when such an approach contributed to a narrative of Afghanistan based on a narrow focus on battlefield statistics and, later, human rights abuses.

The application of postcolonialism and by extension the imagined geographies of Orientalism, together with theories related to performative violence in the creation of space, in particularly 'opportunity space', provides another layer of insight into the Taliban's actions in and through public spaces. Challenging their own subaltern status through an anti-imperialist stance, and in some ways a postcolonial stance, the Taliban use performative violence to create a 'Talibanized space' that reflected their emerging identity and values. With consistent messaging through reiterated actions, events and texts, the Taliban gradually created a metanarrative of harsh justice, anti-corruption and morality based on their interpretation of Islam, laying the foundations for tense but effective security. The ultimate aim of this exercise was the creation of an Islamic emirate, the very reason why Afghans had been urged to take up arms against the British in the 19th century, the Soviets in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Americans in the 21st century. This Taliban metanarrative was primarily performed and spatially choreographed, often violently, in and through public spaces. The use of these new frames of reference reveals a movement that has performatively challenged the imagined geographies of Afghanistan, and by extension, the Western power-knowledge nexus of Said's theory of Orientalism.

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