

BOOK REVIEWS

Afghanistan: a cultural and political history, by Thomas Barfield, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010, 400 pp, US\$29.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9780691145686

Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History is a timely and engaging study of Afghan history through a distinctly anthropological lens. In this work, Barfield provides a convincing description of the changing nature of political authority in Afghanistan and how the expansion of the definition of those eligible to rule the state has made politics in the country increasingly fractious. Afghanistan's early history of being ruled by a professional ruling class meant that under Turko-Persian rulers only men from certain descent groups were entitled to compete for power, making military overthrows resemble corporate take-overs (only the leaders are removed) more than a reshaping of the political landscape. In response largely to external forces, first the British Empire and later the Soviets, the concept of who has authority to rule the country has expanded from the Musahiban dynasty to include an increasing level of popular participation. This participation has come under a variety of names and guises, from the proletariat (under the PDPA) and nationalism (under Najibullah) to Islam (under the Taliban). This expansion, however, has also made current battles over political legitimacy in Afghanistan difficult to resolve.

Barfield's background as an anthropologist means that he privileges the culture and material life of Afghans. His first chapter, "People and Places," outlines the patterns of subsistence, social organization, and settlement. The subsequent five chapters lay out how Afghan politics play out in this distinct setting. Drawing heavily from fourteenth-century writer ibn Khaldun, the central tension in the book does not stem from ethnic or regional differences but from the split between marginal, egalitarian, mountainous tribes whose social organization is based on kinship, and those stratified, economically integrated, but morally suspect groups living in cities. In ibn Khaldun's model, marginal nomads repeatedly rise to overthrow corrupt urban rulers, only to find themselves susceptible to the wealth and ease of city life over the coming generations. In Afghanistan, it is possible to trace a similar pattern of rebellions from the rural margins well into the twentieth century with the civil war of 1929, the response to the communist coup, and the rise of the Taliban.

For those interested in concepts of nation and nationalism, the Afghan case presents certain dilemmas. For example, in Afghanistan we find "ethnicities without nationalism" (p. 8). Barfield in particular dispels the notion of Afghanistan being a Pashtun state; in the long historical view, Afghanistan has only been ruled by Pashtuns for the past 265 years, as opposed to eight previous centuries of rule by Turko-Mongolian dynasties. This history has shaped political authority in Afghanistan – one of the reasons Turkic tribes were more successful than Pashtun tribes for many years was that their hierarchical social structure was easier to mobilize than the egalitarian organization of most Pashtun tribes. In fact, it was only as the Durrani Pashtuns took on increasingly hierarchal political structures that they came to power.

Writing an account that bridges both history and anthropology will probably leave those too firmly on either side of the divide frustrated at times. After reading a convincing argument for the persistence of five key regions in Afghan political life, some

anthropologists focusing on the local level may be left wondering if individuals would really continue submitting to an Afghan state simply due to the threat of even more distant neighboring countries, as Barfield argues. Similarly, historians may be left bothered at the privileging of certain events and periods over others (the civil war following the withdrawal of the Soviets, in particular, gets few pages). In most instances, however, this study of political patterns that underlie historical events is deeply persuasive and provides an intriguing re-examination of many pivotal eras in Afghan history. For example, Barfield recasts the political legacy of the often-cited centralizer Abdur Rahman Khan's attempts to marginalize tribes on the periphery, which in fact laid the groundwork for the collapse of his dynasty two generations later.

While the strength of the book in contrast with other histories of Afghanistan is Barfield's approach of viewing "the Afghans themselves as the main players" (p. 2), there is still much that one can learn about the current international intervention in Afghanistan and different models of imperialism. Barfield, in particular, contrasts "American cheese" and "Swiss cheese" versions of domination (a "Swiss cheese" empire, preferred by the Turks, among others, has holes in it, while the "American cheese" model attempts to cover a territory with a single uniform ruling slice). Abdur Rahman Khan was effective with the "Swiss cheese" model, whereas his successors erred in their attempts to promote a more uniform, controlling and penetrating state – a mistake that the international community appeared to make again, in many ways, following the fall of the Taliban.

Looking into the future, Barfield points to many of the cultural contributions of Afghanistan to the rest of the region in the past, during periods when it was free from outside threat. At the same time, however, he acknowledges that it will take a strong leader to break the current cycle of violence. Compounding this difficulty is the insistence of the international community on setting up a direct-rule model of governance that has rarely been successful in Afghan history. This work's strength is ultimately its ability to describe how Afghanistan got to where it is today from an internal perspective, while presenting why state-building efforts focused on centralized, uniform rule have been so unsuccessful.

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The idea of Galicia: history and fantasy in Habsburg political culture, by Larry Wolff, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010, xi + 486 pp., US\$60.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780804762670

It is hard to imagine a student of Eastern Europe who has not encountered the work of historian Larry Wolff, who some seventeen years ago brilliantly wrote of that entity's "invention" by the armchair philosophers of the Enlightenment. In his latest – and no less brilliant – book, Wolff has taken on another invented concept. This is the titular idea of Galicia, the Habsburg crownland contrived from lands taken from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the first partition of 1772 and which survived more or less intact until the end of World War I. While Galicia may be a long "extinct political entit[y]," its legacy is still oddly felt today: witness the post-1989 resurrection of Habsburg symbols as well as the perceived distinctiveness of the corresponding parts of today's