Book Reviews

Wazhmah Osman / Robert D. Crews (eds), *Decolonizing Afghanistan: Countering Imperial Knowledge and Power.* 377 pages, 33 illustrations and maps, US $29.95 (paperback), US $119.95 (hardcover). Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2025. ISBN 978-1-4780-3260-1 (paperback), 978-1-4780-2922-9 (hardcover), 978-1-4780-6142-7 (eBook)

Edited by Wazhmah Osman and Robert D. Crews, *Decolonizing Afghanistan: Countering Imperial Knowledge and Power* brings together an interdisciplinary group of scholars working across history, anthropology, cultural and media studies, political sociology and critical international relations to examine how imperial power in Afghanistan has been sustained through knowledge production. Structured in four parts, the volume first traces how Afghanistan has been historically constituted as a governable problem space – from colonial ethnography and Cold War area studies to the post-2001 interventionary assemblage – before turning to the infrastructures, representations and counter-knowledges that shape and contest this epistemic order. The opening chapters (Manchanda; Crews; Osman) deconstruct enduring imperial tropes such as the "graveyard of empires", reconstruct the Soviet colonial archive and analyse the intertwined imperial and development gazes that framed the US-led intervention after 2001.

Subsequent contributions (Zafar; Aikins; Karimi) examine the material and institutional infrastructures of empire, including counterinsurgency training, private security economies and biometric surveillance, showing how military, humanitarian and development practices produced authoritative forms of expertise that normalised occupation while displacing responsibility for failure onto Afghan society. A further section (Hannun; Qasmi; Bose; Azami) focuses on representation and mediation, analysing how media, cinema, gendered narratives and information warfare have reproduced tropes of crisis, rescue and cultural deficiency – even within ostensibly critical or reformist accounts.

The final part (Zeweri; Nasseri; Noor; Samizay; Saed, with a coda by Chakravartty) foregrounds Afghan and diasporic responses through activism, literature and visual art, mapping how alternative epistemic and political imaginaries speak back to empire. Collectively, the volume situates Afghanistan at the centre of debates on liberal interventionism and the Global War on Terror, demonstrating that imperial domination operates not only through military and political force but through epistemic regimes – academic expertise, media representation,

surveillance technologies and cultural knowledge – that render intervention thinkable and legitimate. By exposing and unsettling these regimes, the book advances a decolonial agenda that seeks to decolonise Afghanistan both as an object of analysis and as a political imagination, offering a powerful vantage point from which to rethink empire, modernity and the politics of knowledge production.

While the volume's empirical breadth is a clear strength – enabling a rich analysis that moves beyond state-centric frameworks – the balance of its critique leans more toward deconstructing imperial knowledge than toward fully reconstructing or centring the plurality of Afghan epistemic worlds. Readers interested in such pluriversal alternatives might look to Boaventura de Sousa Santos'[1] work on epistemologies of the South and cognitive justice, which foregrounds coexisting ways of knowing beyond Western universals, as well as Arturo Escobar's[2] articulation of the pluriverse as a political-ontological project that challenges modern, statist and developmentalist frames (Escobar 2018).

The focus of *Decolonizing Afghanistan* remains predominantly on how Afghanistan is known through interventionist logics, with somewhat less systematic attention to how Afghans themselves generate meaning, navigate sovereignty or produce knowledge in their daily lives beyond these frames. This creates a tension where the critique of representation powerfully exposes external constructs, yet the exploration of internally articulated alternatives feels less fully developed.

Theoretically, the work productively engages with decolonial and postcolonial thought, yet this engagement could be deepened. Some analytical categories central to the discussion – such as the state, civil society or development – are themselves products of colonial modernity and could benefit from more explicit problematisation within a decolonial framework. Similarly, while referenced, concepts like the pluriverse that directly contest universalist epistemologies are not extensively explored. This points to a broader opportunity for future work: to more fully operationalise decolonial theory not just as a lens for critique, but as a foundation for articulating distinct epistemic starting points.

Finally, as is common with ambitious edited collections, the chapters vary in their methodological and theoretical integration. The volume's unwavering normative commitment to decolonisation is its driving force, yet a fuller engagement with the on-the-ground complexities and potential contradictions of decolonial praxis in Afghanistan's challenging context would have further enriched this vital contribution. These points, however, primarily highlight pathways for the continuing scholarly conversation this volume so importantly initiates.

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1   Santos, Boaventura de Sousa (2014): *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
2   Escobar, Arturo (2018): *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Despite these limitations, *Decolonizing Afghanistan* makes a valuable contribution by re-centring Afghanistan within broader debates on empire, knowledge and power. It challenges scholars of Asian studies, international relations and development to interrogate the epistemological assumptions underpinning their work. The volume will be of particular interest to researchers and graduate students engaged in decolonial approaches, critical security studies and the politics of intervention, and it represents an important step toward rethinking Afghanistan beyond imperial epistemic frames.

Zulfia Abawe

AMIN SAIKAL, *How to Lose a War: The Story of America's Intervention in Afghanistan.* 320 pages, 1 map, $30.00. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024. ISBN 978-0-3002-7766-1 (eBook)

In *How to Lose a War*, Amin Saikal, Emeritus Professor at Australian National University and a long-standing scholar of international relations in Afghanistan and the wider region, examines the US-led intervention in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021. Drawing from a background in international relations and security studies, Saikal approaches his analytical assessment of the war through a lens that privileges elite political decision-making, regional diplomacy and the evolution of US and coalition strategy. Saikal's central argument is that defeat was not inevitable but resulted from political factors. What began as a narrow counterterrorism mission gradually expanded into an ambitious project of state-building and democratisation, while Afghan governance remained shaped by elite competition and weak institutional legitimacy. At the same time, regional dynamics, especially Pakistan's role, undermined prospects for a durable settlement.

One of the book's main strengths is its sustained focus on how failure unfolded through a sequence of political and strategic choices rather than due to a single decisive error. Saikal traces how expanding objectives led to internal contradictions over time. Counterterrorism, coalition management and institution-building were pursued simultaneously, often without a clear understanding of how these goals might interact or undermine one another. The chapters on Afghan governance are particularly effective in showing how elite fragmentation and institutional design contributed to declining state legitimacy and administrative weakness. In this respect, the book offers a convincing explanation for why extensive international resources failed to translate into durable political authority.