Frontiers: Real and Imagined

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Ruling the Savage Periphery: Frontier Governance and the Making of the Modern State, by Benjamin D. Hopkins, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2020, 279 pp., £39.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-674-98070-9

Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge, by Nivi Manchanda, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, xi + 251 pp., £75 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-108-49123-5

If you take a drive through the old town of Karachi at some point you may pass Frere Hall. Once the centrepiece of the colonial town, this grand building now serves as a library, exhibition space, and wedding venue for middle-class Karachi citizens. The hall is named in honour of Sir Henry Bartle Frere, the colonial administrator who made his name in Sindh province, designing and implementing frontier systems. As he described it at the time, these were modes by which "a powerful, regular, and civilized government can habitually deal with inferior semi-civilized, and less perfectly organized Governments either within or beyond its own frontier".[1] Frere's systems were not simply territorial delineations – they marked out a

[1] Bayly 2016, 237.

legalistic and normative distinction that divided governing practices in the frontier spaces of northern India, and justified the garrison state whose legacies live on in contemporary Pakistan. A further drive out of Karachi to the coastal districts exemplifies these legacies. A vast stretch of land – some of the most expensive real estate in the city – is now parcelled out and ready for sale to wealthy Pakistanis seeking to build their homes, generating healthy proceeds for the Pakistani Army as part of its astonishing property portfolio.

Often depicted in the western geographical imagination as a domain of urban violence and terrorism, Karachi city exemplifies the juxtaposition of colonial and postcolonial governing practices that trace a genealogy through what has become known as "frontier governmentality" – a concept that unites the distinct studies presented in this review essay. Indeed, as these books highlight, we can see in global history, International Relations, and political geography the glimmers of what we might call a renewed "frontier moment" in the humanities and social sciences. Taking South Asian studies as an example, recent work by Elisabeth Leake, Mark Condos, Bérénice Guyot Réchard, Tom Simpson, Kyle Gardner, and others show how a burgeoning collective of (mostly) junior scholars are moving beyond the "metropole" to the "periphery" and indeed challenging this binary.[2] "Turns" to empire in related disciplines, including International Relations, Geography, and Sociology, have produced intellectual co-travellers who have sought to puncture the territorial rigidity of traditionally state-centric fields and challenge linear conceptions of borders, turning instead to the historical emergence and contemporary importance of so-called spaces "in-between": borderlands, buffer-states, and frontiers. Global history, and particularly the global history of knowledge circulations, make intriguing contributions to this work, offering insights into how governing practices and

[2] Leake 2017; Guyot-Réchard 2017; Condos 2017; Simpson 2021; Gardner 2021.

geographical imaginaries became “globalized”, particularly in the nineteenth century as part of the wider respatialization brought by global imperial power.[3] These works, including those under review here, have the potential to unite disciplines in creative and exciting ways.

One of the prime movers in this frontier moment has been Benjamin D. Hopkins. His latest book marks the continuation of a career that has helped to reshape our understanding of the history of state-building in modern Afghanistan. His more recent work has drawn upon Foucauldian inspiration to mark out the concept of “frontier” governmentality in its South Asian articulations.[4] *Ruling the Savage Periphery* is his most expansive project yet, tracing the global diffusion of frontier governing practices from northwest India, to South Africa, to the American west, and finally Argentina. In effect, this book provides a global history of frontier governmentality, a concept that sits at the heart of the study.

“Frontier” is a word that understandably evokes territory or space, but for Hopkins the term is a particular *type* of space, a conceptual rather than physical space, subject to “specific manifestations of state power and political authority”, and thought of more usefully in terms of the governing *practices* that shape and define it.[5] “Frontier *governmentality*” is a concept that therefore captures a particular regime of governing power, one which feeds upon territorial ambiguity giving rise to a set of interlinked defining characteristics. The first were practices of indirect rule and governance through supposed “customs and traditions”; a hybrid form of governance ostensibly more in keeping with indigenous institutions of rule placing a premium

[3] Feichtinger, Bhatti, and Hülmbauer 2020; Manjapra 2014; Ballantyne and Burton 2012.

[4] Hopkins 2008; Marsden and Hopkins 2012.

[5] Hopkins 2020, 14.

on colonial knowledge as a crutch for administrators "on the spot". Second, frontier governmentality took place in a context of sovereign pluralism in which multiple political allegiances could coexist, interact, and become nested within one another, allowing for the colonial rhetoric of "native" independence. This fiction masked, however, a more uneven landscape. Although colonial authorities oversaw a realm that was without a formal sovereign hierarchy, in practice multiple modes of demarcation, stratification, and control were employed. Among these tactics of government, legal regimes were paramount. This links to the third feature of frontier governmentality, that of *imperial objecthood*. Legal regimes were highly uneven, fluid, and mobile in their applicability. Indeed very often their application resembled what Lauren Benton has termed elsewhere, forms of "legal posturing" – the allusion to legal frameworks that were in practice frequently improvised, circumvented, or simply ignored.[6] The casting of frontier populations as "savage" or "barbarous" allowed a blanket derogation from such principles. As Hopkins puts it, frontier populations were accordingly "objects of state action without being subjects of its justice".[7] They were not "colonial subjects, but rather imperial objects". Despite this state of legal exception, the fifth feature of frontier governmentality was the ensnaring of frontier populations in a variety of economic dependencies, notably through military enlistment and patterns of migratory labour. Though rhetorically independent, frontier populations remained politically and economically beholden their imperial neighbours.[8]

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[6] Benton 2010.

[7] Hopkins 2020, 20, 18-23.

[8] Ibid., 18–23.

Armed with this conceptual framework, *Ruling the Savage Periphery*, then transitions into the global story by which this genre of imperial power became established and diffused across multiple sites. This is a story that encompasses legal-bureaucratic processes, and more embodied personal narratives of so-called "men on the spot" (unsurprisingly, they were all men). In chapter two we are introduced to one of the main plotlines through the story of the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR). First promulgated in 1872 in northwest India, the FCR provides the archetypal legal institutionalization of frontier governmentality – an attempted "colonial territorialization of power" that sought to resolve the ambiguity over the legal status of frontier populations and determine the sovereign authority of the colonial state. In practice it did neither. By partially outsourcing judicial authority to supposedly "traditional" indigenous governing institutions such as the "tribal" *jirgah* (or "Council of Elders"), colonial authorities created a mechanism by which frontier populations could potentially evade colonial authority. On the other hand, defining the applicability of the regulations in terms of cultural signifiers such as "Baluch" or "Pathan" resulted in a set of highly uneven deterritorialized legal provisions to which physical location was of secondary importance. Colonial authorities took advantage of the vagueness of these signifiers, applying them to those who exhibited "savage" behaviour, a clear manifestation of the colonial rule of difference. To the extent that the FCR did delineate a frontier territory, it served to justify a range of punitive and draconian measures including financial blockades, legal exceptions, and collective violence.

But this was not simply a story of the attempted taming of India's northwest frontier. Despite its failings, in the late nineteenth century the FCR embarked upon a transnational imperial career. Reaching Baluchistan in 1876, the Kachin Hills in 1895, and the Chin Hills in 1896, the regulations resurfaced in Iraq and Palestine, Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa, as chapter three explores in more detail. Variants of Kenya's frontier law also appeared in mandatory

Tanganyika and British Somaliland. Tracing the diffusion of frontier governmentality, Hopkins showcases his prowess in archival detective work, and makes clear the overall significance of this book's global rendering of the imperial frontier.

This is not only a story of the diffusion of bureaucratic practices. Chapter four elaborates the normative language of "savagery" and "civilization" around which frontier debates took place, linking together the likes of Henry Bartle Frere, the British Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone, the Argentine President Domingo Sarmiento, and later on Frederick Jackson Taylor's epochal work on the American frontier. As Hopkins puts it, these individuals demonstrate the "intellectual connective tissue"[9] of a worldview based around the colonial specter of savagery. In some cases, as with Henry Bartle Frere's (ultimately failed) career move to South Africa, these intellectual connections were forged by individual administrators traversing webs of empire. In others, the affinities were more rhetorical, but no less impactful. The frontier mentality and its associated governing forms reshaped the plains of Argentina, and played a formative role in the establishing of the Native American reservation system, as chapters five and six demonstrate in greater detail.

This geographically dispersed "nexus of frontier governmentality"[10] brings to the fore a vital yet hidden component to the story of the emergence of modern interstate order, defined not by the establishing of linear boundaries, but by the founding and management of a vast apparatus of legal and administrative governing power that sought to control territories that fell between the cracks of more territorially fixed sovereign entities. This is a major contribution to our

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[9] Ibid., 115.

[10] Ibid.

understanding of the historical development of the contemporary international order. In the demarcation of a normative universe that placed millions of people into subordinate categories of tribe, class, and race, *Ruling the Savage Periphery* is far from the simple story of aberrant anomalous spaces, but rather shows us how frontiers were in fact a counterpart "foundational element to the state-centric order constructed at the time".[11]

In a sense, *Imagining Afghanistan* picks up where *Ruling the Savage Periphery* leaves us, in time, and in theoretical enquiry. Hopkins' book is replete with reference to the ways that empires have represented the fringes of their power. Nivi Manchanda's work begins on this terrain of representation. But whereas Hopkins explores the genealogy of power that can be found in frontier spaces, Manchanda takes us in different Foucauldian directions, exploring both the practice and the imaginative scope of imperial power in frontier states, applied to Afghanistan in particular.

What is it that is being "imagined"? Manchanda offers three themes that stake this out. First, Afghanistan is imagined as a space apart, perpetually unstable, "failed", or violent and thereby in need of intervention. Key here are the "politics of disavowal" that shape these representations, in particular through the denial of imperial complicity in the violence that is perceived to be emanating from Afghanistan. Once again we see how the imperial "metropole" and the colonized "periphery" are tied together in relations of co-constitution, even when these relations are denied. Second, woven through the book is a study of the "grammar of difference". This goes beyond the crude Saidian bifurcation of "self" and "other", exploring the implicit hierarchization and segregation of peoples and places to which Afghanistan and its populace

[11] Ibid., 6–7.

are subject. The country is thereby constituted as an *object* of intervention, echoing Hopkins' thematic of the frontier as an imperial object. Third, these imaginaries of Afghanistan are not transhistorical, but rather periodically reactivated as renewed imperial interventions are mounted. Through its broad historical sweep, beginning in the nineteenth century, and taking us up to the present day, Manchanda is able to highlight how the cursory and fleeting nature of international engagement with Afghanistan encourages the periodic recovery of a series of knowledge forms relating to Afghan history, politics, and society. A prominent example of this, explored in chapter three, is the drawing upon a sedimented archive of colonial texts written on Afghanistan's "tribal" society. Academics, policy makers, and military personnel fall back on the "emergency episteme" of the "tribe" in order to inform their practices, thereby reaffirming the "quasi-coloniality" of Afghanistan's status through the knowledge forms by which outsiders engage with it.

One of the important contributions made clear in this book then, are the contemporary resonances of the colonial and imperial lineages of imperial knowledge on Afghanistan. Whereas Hopkins concentrates on the genealogies of sovereignty that gave rise to frontier governmentality, Manchanda is more concerned with tracing the historical genealogies of *knowledge* through which Afghanistan emerges in the (mostly) western imagination as a discursive regime. As she makes clear, the representations that shape our understanding of Afghanistan *come from somewhere*. Moreover, they are not mere discourses but perform intellectual and ideological labour, making certain policy choices imaginable, even desirable.[12] These representations are the conditions of possibility within which foreign interventions in Afghanistan have taken place. Once again, Afghanistan, as a "periphery", is productive of

[12] Manchanda 2020, 143.

exceptional, violent, and quasi-colonized-spaces; of new forms of orientalist knowledge; and of racialized and gendered subjects.

Chapter one elaborates this discursive regime in more detail, concentrating first on the spatial and bodily representations to which Afghanistan is subjected, as a "diseased" or "failed" entity – as the "graveyard of empires" for instance – one in need of palliative care or intervention. Chapter two builds on these themes through a study of the representation of Afghanistan as a particular type of state. Instructive here is Ann Stoler's concept of "imperial formations" as "macropolities whose technologies of rule thrive on the production of exceptions and their uneven and changing proliferation".[13] Afghanistan occupies such a formation, a "scaled genre of rule" within which statehood and sovereignty including its territorial expressions are not steady but in processes of constant formation. Accordingly, Afghanistan may exist as a state but only in the shadow of ongoing imperial formations that are disavowed. Here Manchanda and Hopkins meet on the common ground of frontier governmentalities and the case of the Frontier Crimes Regulations with Manchanda centring more explicitly practices of violence, incarceration, and partition, in a territorial, legal, and bodily sense.

Chapter three turns to the "knee-jerk" knowledge economy of Afghanistan studies and its periodic reconvening under crisis moments. The genealogy of colonial knowledge traced here covers ground already partially explored by Hopkins, Hanifi, and others, although the notion of the category of "tribe" as an emergency episteme hints at further work to be done on the ways that anthropological tropes are hitched to more contemporary forms of policy knowledge. Here, the treatment of "knowledge" as a more complex assemblage of meanings,

[13] Stoler 2006, 128.

representations, and ways of knowing (Foucault's "epistemes") is key. Edward Said's notion of orientalism as the corporate body for knowing and ruling over the "orient" is taken in new and important directions in this work. As one of Said's intellectual mentees, Hamid Dabashi, has suggested, we need not assume that orientalist knowledge was historically static. In particular, what he terms processes of "epistemic endosmosis" – knowledge percolating for instance from think tanks into the public domain - is conducive to the production of "disposable knowledge" or "fast-knowledge" for the fast-food era.[14] Manchanda's incorporation of military cheat-sheets for officers deploying to Afghanistan, keen to understand the "human terrain" gives one such example of Tarak Barkawi's "utile forms" of military know-how. But universities, academic disciplines, foreign ministries, humanitarian travelogues, and documentary filmmakers are all participants in this institutional production of Afghanistan as a discursive regime, with *Imagining Afghanistan* giving us the tools to recognize it, and the expressed aim of then decolonizing such knowledge.

Arguably it is in chapters four and five where *Imagining Afghanistan* stretches its analysis into its most ground-breaking territory, exploring the gendered subjectivities of Afghan women and Afghan men, produced by the discursive regime of imperial knowledge on Afghanistan. Chapter four points to the familiar tropes of salvation and "unveiling" through which Afghan women become cast as both the embodiment of an Afghan nation that needs rescuing, and yet a marker of the country's perpetual backwardness. Chapter five meanwhile, explores the masculinist tropes through which Afghan men may be rendered as a societal threat, or – in the case of former President, Hamid Karzai – subject to paternalist discourses of disciplining authority. In keeping with the rest of the book, Manchanda draws upon heterodox influences

[14] Dabashi 2015, loc 810.

here, spanning insights from gender, queer theory, and postcolonial theory, targeting intersectionalities of race and gender. These chapters also showcase the methodological dexterity of the book, in its drawing upon an archive of the present, through USAID and World Bank press statements, to newspaper special reports and film documentaries. Once again, this is not simply the story of linguistic deconstruction, but also the story of the *world-making* effects of representational forms through the policy agendas of humanitarian organizations and their state-supporters.

Where do these two works meet? On intellectual terms, both adopt and continue the long-standing tradition of South Asianist engagement with continental poststructuralist thought and Michel Foucault in particular. This should come as no surprise. For Hopkins, the genealogical approach works well in delineating the frontier-as-practice concept, as well as locating it in a particular temporal sequence of "colonial governmentality". *Imagining Afghanistan* meanwhile is clearly located in the rich pantheon of poststructuralist-inspired South Asian studies, tracing its own genealogy back through Nicolas Dirks, Bernard Cohn, Ramchandra Guha, Gayatri Spivak, and of course Edward Said. Hopkins wears this theoretical heritage lightly, producing an eminently readable book that balances its theoretical/conceptual contributions with truly ground-breaking insight into the globalization of frontier governmentality. *Imagining Afghanistan* meanwhile, is much more deliberately theoretical, and explicit in its methodology. Manchanda's work reaches far beyond governmentality studies, revealing in the contemporary setting not only the ongoing "corporate" production of Afghanistan as a discursive regime, but also its inherently gendered, racist, and militarist locutions. Predictions of the demise of poststructuralist South Asian studies are premature on the strength of these works, and we stand to benefit.

In thematic terms, both of these books reveal much on the *productivity* of frontier spaces and imagined geographies such as Afghanistan. Manchanda shows us how Afghanistan has functioned, and continues to function, as a site for the discursive constitution of racialized and gendered subjects; of exceptional, violent, and quasi-colonized spaces; and of corporate knowledge of what she terms the Afghan *dis*Orient. Hopkins' book is more meta-historical on this theme. For him, frontier spaces are fundamental not only for understanding the constitution of the modern state, through perhaps proto-state forms including colonial states, but also for their formative role in constituting the modern world order as such. Frontier governmentality emerges from his book as a crucial period in the genealogy of state power, and therefore entangled with correlated practices including the emergence of political economy, capitalism, the statistical sciences, and the practices of population control. Accordingly, we could say that the globalization of frontier governmentality is tied up with the story of the spread of liberal order, including the production of what Lisa Lowe terms "residual" practices and processes - those that continue, despite their apparent opposition to dominant understandings of "liberal" consensus.[15] The frontier, and perhaps Afghanistan itself, can be read through these books as examples of geographies that are perpetually external to, and dependent upon, liberal governmentalities and their intimate forms.

As such, we also see in both of these books, not an analytical bifurcation between "core" and "periphery" but rather their deep co-implication and entanglement. The frontier is productive of the state, interstate, and world order. The "tentacles" of economic and political dependence tying it to the colonial state through its "quasi-colonial" status. The frontier is not a periphery, but a resource upon which colonial states and imperial formations are parasitic. But taking this

[15] Lowe 2015.

observation into the contemporary period, as does Manchanda, reveals the dark side of contemporary frontiers, both real and imagined. Economic dependencies, practices of policy experimentation, weapons testing, population control, and uneven legal realms endure in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, the US-Mexico border, and beyond. As International Relations scholars and sociologists including Alex Barder, Tarak Barkawi, and Julian Go have demonstrated, "imperial laboratories" overseas have functioned, and continue to function as testing beds for policies, governing practices, and forms of violence that reverberate back into the metropole.[16] Thinkers from Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Hannah Arendt, right back to Herbert Spencer have warned of the "boomerang effect" of imperial power and the corrosive influence of imperial practices overseas on domestic politics at home. In the militarization of the US police force, and calls for its defunding; in the suspension of *haebeas corpus* under terrorism legislation; in the deployment of counter-terror communication strategies deployed in Britain during the COVID pandemic, and on the steps of the Capitol building in Washington DC,, these effects live on. The social forces, governing practices, and discourses of representation that shape our contemporary politics are better understood from the position of the "periphery". The frontier is everywhere.

In the same way that sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, so book reviews that suggest "this isn't the book I would have written", are the lowest form of critique. But we can perhaps ask what questions these books might leave unaddressed? Or perhaps more accurately, where might they lead us next? Firstly, *Ruling the Savage Periphery* is clearly a book that is motivated by contemporary concerns. As Hopkins argues, whether it's events in modern day Khyber-Pakhtunkwa or the militancy of Boko Haram - these are manifestations of the downstream

[16] Barder 2015; Barkawi 2017; Go 2020.

consequences of frontier governmentality. We needn't stop there. Frontiers need not pertain to the borderlands of states or imperial domains, they may be internal, as critical geographers and historians such as Trevor Paglen or Eric Lewis Beverley show.[17] They may also be maritime. One example might be the European migrant crisis in the Mediterranean. But this raises a question over the historical specificity of frontier governmentality as Hopkins understands it. The rise of cartographic technology, the emergence of "rational" bureaucratic states, the technology of population control that these bureaucracies perfected, ideologies of progress (including "scientific" racism), and the professionalization of military units - these are all nineteenth-century developments that fed into frontier-governmentality in historically specific ways. Foucault's genealogical study of sovereign power wasn't meant to stop at this point. The question here is how should we read contemporary frontier governmentality today?

Second, both books allude to the spaces they seek to understand beyond governing practices, and beyond their discursive representation, but these are only fleeting glances. Manchanda's centering of the western discursive regime is crucial to understanding the distinctiveness of our neo-imperial imagination of Afghanistan, but we might recall the long-standing critique of postcolonial theory's potential reification of the western imaginary, which has the ironic consequence of drowning out the agency and knowledge claims of those peoples and places it seeks to recover. This is a standard critique which applies to the work of the present author too, but what might we learn from closer attention to the multiple lives of the frontier, beyond (neo)imperial or (neo)colonial forms of power and knowledge? David Brophy's *Uighur Nation,* James Caron's fascinating studies of Pashto 'border literature', and Hopkins' fruitful

[17] Beverley 2018; Paglen 2006.

collaboration with Magnus Marsden point to the fertile ground to be explored here.[18] The manner in which frontier populations adapted to frontier governmentality by evading its legal provisions, or by embodying certain "cultural" practices in order to benefit from its loopholes, suggests a form of legal or epistemic insurgency – a version of frontier resistance and a return of sorts (perhaps) to James C. Scott's agenda-setting work on *Zomia*.[19] We also gain glimpses of those indigenous practices that colonial authorities sought themselves to mimic, such as Theophilus Shepstone's attempted mimicry of the sovereign form of the great Zulu emperor Shakla, in the administration of the Natal frontier.[20] One route might be towards a more "intimate" form of what Derek Gregory has termed the "rush to the intimate",[21] perhaps through a disruption and decolonization of Manchanda's "emergency epistemes". Although here we hit upon the conundrum of the decolonizing project – what is left of knowledge, when modernity (including its forms of knowledge) is hitched to the colonial? The category of the "indigenous" is itself arguably a product of colonial modernity and perhaps in certain ways a product of frontier governmentality too.

What of alternative imperialisms? Other empires had their own Afghanistan moment, as Manchanda points out with reference to the Soviet empire, as well as their own frontiers.[22] What forms of governance these peripheries produced would help to thicken the global story of frontier governmentality, as well as point to the discursive regimes that continue to shape

[18] Brophy 2016; Caron 2019; Marsden and Hopkins 2012; Marsden and Hopkins 2013.

[19] Scott 2009.

[20] Hopkins 2020, 85.

[21] Gregory 2008.

[22] Hirsch 2005; Ciancia 2021.

our understanding of Tibet, Xinjiang, Nagorno-Karabakh, Crimea, and the US-Mexican border. Might these be the next scholarly frontiers?

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