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Introduction

> Perhaps, too, we should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands and its interests . . . We should admit rather that power produces knowledge . . . that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose at the same time power relations.
>
> —Michel Foucault, 1979[1]

> [R]epresentation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the 'real' world of objects, people, or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events.
>
> —Stuart Hall, 1997[2]

An Afghan schoolbook, which uses bullets and Kalashnikovs as counting tools, is one of the items prominently on display at the National Army Museum (NAM) in London, housed in its 'Conflicts of Interest' gallery, which opened to the public in May 2013. This illustrated children's textbook references apples and oranges alongside *mujahid* and *jihad* and uses rifles along with pencils as numerical aids. The NAM website notes: '[T]he book dates from the Islamic year 1356 (c1986) during the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Its warlike content is a stark reminder of the lasting legacy of conflict in modern Afghan society', with the curator Mairead O'Hara further elucidating the way in which war is 'part of the fabric of daily life' in Afghanistan. To pre-empt hasty judgement, she explains that while using firearms as tools to learn how to count may seem sinister to us in the West, these objects compose the everyday

[1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 27–8.
[2] Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, vol. 2 (London: Sage, 1997), 5.

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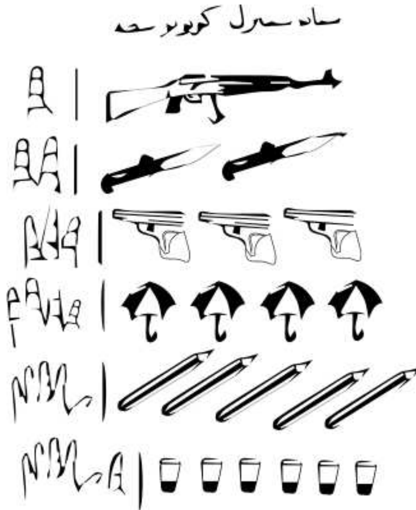

Figure I.1 Afghan textbook from the Soviet era.
Image reproduced by Tarini Manchanda

reality of life in Afghanistan. So, while these objects are very different from ‘*our* everyday objects’, they are the pedestrian objects of everyday life in *their* society.[3]

The textbook (Figure I.1), along with the other exhibits displayed, may be read as a laudable attempt to bring the military intervention then under way in Afghanistan into the popular consciousness of the citizens of a country whose army has been embroiled in a long and protracted war ‘over there’.[4] What the exhibition and its curators fail to mention is *how* these textbooks came into being. During the mid 1980s, a project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) printed millions of textbooks in Peshawar that were distributed to schoolchildren across Afghanistan. The textbooks were designed to indoctrinate Afghans against the evils of the Soviet Union and made for immensely powerful propaganda. Specialists from the Afghanistan Center at the University of Nebraska Omaha received $51 million to develop a curriculum, which glorified *jihad*, celebrated martyrdom and dehumanised

[3] Both the video and the description, along with a photograph of the textbook, can be found online at www.nam.ac.uk/collection/collection-news/new-afghanistan-objects-on-display (last accessed 13 March 2019).

[4] The Afghanistan section of the gallery also includes the memorial wristband for Corporal David Barnsdale, who was killed in an improvised explosive device (IED) strike in 2010, ‘lucky charm’ bracelets and soldiers’ identification badges.

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foreign invaders.[5] Published in Dari and Pashto, these schoolbooks taught the alphabet through Kalashnikovs and counting through guns and bullets, and had elaborate mathematical questions which drew on conflict scenarios, deploying various firearms in inventive ways, for more advanced pupils. One example read: ‘A Kalashnikov bullet travels at 800 meters per second. A *mujahid* has the forehead of a Russian in his sights 3,200 meters away. How many seconds will it take the bullet to hit the Russian’s forehead?’ Although USAID funding for the project stopped in 1994, multiple copies of the texts remained in circulation in the 1990s and into the 2000s. The Taliban, in another grisly turn, continued using these American-produced textbooks, but, in keeping with their fabricated scripture that denounced all pictorial representation of human images, removed the heads of people depicted in the books.[6] What remained were images of decapitated persons carrying Kalashnikovs, poignant pedagogical instruments for eight-year-olds.

As a statement on the ways in which knowledge is produced about Afghanistan, this anecdote crystallises three of the key themes that underpin this book. In the first instance, it reflects the complete disavowal of complicity that has characterised imperial policy and strategy with regard to the country. Afghanistan represents an intrinsically violent place in this imaginary, one whose violence ‘we’ have very little to do with.[7] Second, running parallel to, and overlapping with, this politics of disavowal is the operation of a ‘grammar of difference’,[8] which may be best understood as the implicit hierarchisation and segregation of certain places and peoples based on a Manichaean division of the world into two[9]. Such logics of difference and distancing are key in

[5] This is now public knowledge. See for instance Mahmood Mamdani, ‘The Secular Roots of Radical Political Islam’, in Berma Klein Goldewijk, ed., *Religion, International Relations and Development Cooperation* (Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishing, 2007), 153–60; Joe Stephens and David Ottaway, ‘The ABC’s of Jihad in Afghanistan’, *Washington Post*, 23 March 2002; and Syed Nadir El Edroos, ‘Learn to Be Taliban: K is for Kalashnikov’, *The Express Tribune*, 12 March 2011. The military content was included to ‘stimulate resistance against invasion’, in the words of Yaquib Roshan of Nebraska's Afghanistan Center (quoted in Stephens and Ottaway, ‘The ABC’s of Jihad’). But see for instance Anand Gopal, *No Good Men among the Living: America, the Taliban and the War* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014), which refers to this book as an example of the scriptural fundamentalism of the Taliban.

[6] Stephens and Ottaway, ‘The ABC’s of Jihad’.

[7] Throughout the book, I use ‘we’ to signal a certain positionality, that of the ‘Western’ and, more specifically, Anglophone subject. Sara Ahmed has cautioned against the use of this pronoun, which she claims remains bound to a Eurocentric collective construct in which inclusion is premised on a process of violent exclusion: *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 17. I nonetheless choose to deploy it, not unreflexively, but rather as a reminder of the ways in which even critical scholars situated in the West are ensnared in the reproduction of colonial hierarchy and relations of domination.

[8] Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3.

[9] Lisa Lowe argues through her reading of Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* that in Western theory and philosophy, the world is plotted on a spectrum which ‘permits the

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constituting Afghanistan as an object of enquiry and intervention and the epistemic and physical violence that accompanies these modes of 'interaction' with the Other. Finally, the exhibit and its explication highlight the fundamentally cursory nature of engagement with Afghanistan's history, politics and society, both historically at the height of empire and in the present day. By 'cursory' I mean a hurried, superficial and 'token' involvement that is dramatically intensified in periods of conflict. These three themes spliced together provide the broad conceptual scaffolding of this project.

At its kernel the project is a study that traces the circuits of imperial knowledge production about Afghanistan in an attempt to re-historicise and de-mystify the dominant narratives about the Afghan state and its peoples. Although these are by no means exhaustive or even the only narratives that have circulated about Afghanistan, the power of British and later American imaginaries at the height of their respective empires makes them uniquely important for understanding the processes of knowledge production that structure and enable colonial interventions. A word here on the scope of the book: my singling out the USA and the UK necessarily amounts to an exclusion of alternative imaginaries, mostly pertinently Soviet ones – as crucial to Afghanistan's modern history – and Indian and Pakistani ones – as 'inheritors' of the geo-political imaginaries of their British colonial predecessors. While I fully acknowledge that there are other geographical imaginaries of Afghanistan that are distinct from the Anglosphere, and that even within the Anglosphere (including in India, Pakistan, Canada and Australia) alternative representations abound,[10] my emphasis on Britain and the USA is at once expedient and consistent with my aims. On the one hand, this emphasis helps retain a crisp focus on prepotent narratives that are currently in circulation, not least because of the continuing and dominating presence of British and US forces in Afghanistan. And on the other hand, a critique of British-American Anglophone discourse on Afghanistan assists us in provincialising or 'vulnerabilising' this very discourse. If, through sustained critique, we can move beyond

colonial subsumption of the "lower" Asian and Mediterranean world into the "higher" expression of Christian Europe, while naturalising indigenous disappearance in the Americas and exempting Africa as "unhistorical" placing the entire continent at the "threshold of world history itself"': *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 238. For her, this colonial division of humanity can be tracked as colonial difference within the present that is not a fixed binary distinction, but rather is one that operates through multiple modes of spatial difference and temporal development. I would agree, but also posit that this teleological and gradated difference nonetheless relies on a cruder division of the world into 'developed and developing', 'East and West', 'north and south' or any number of dualistic distinctions that when probed further reveal themselves as more complicated and multivariate.

[10] I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this point and helping me clarify the scope of the manuscript.

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this hegemonic discourse and its totalising ambitions, we can prise open the space for other, less straitened, modes of being and understanding.

Thus, given this scope of the project, which is delimited to these two imperial behemoths, the time frame is from the nineteenth century to the formal withdrawal of troops in 2014, although since the focus is on the discursive constitution of Afghanistan as an object of empire, periods of heightened imperial activity are foregrounded. A related aim of this book is the refiguring of 'common-sense' modes of enquiry and conventional units of analysis in the social sciences and the humanities. Stripped to its essentials, *Imagining Afghanistan* asks two simple but cardinal questions: 'how is Afghanistan thought about in a way such that it is possible to invade and bomb it?' and 'what are the sources of authority that sanction the discourses that make that act of invasion permissible and possible in the first place?'

Afghanistan Classified: Research Question(s)

Academics, politicians, decision-makers and people in all spheres of human interaction present their subjects, construct their analyses and establish meanings. In so doing, they conjure up the world they seek to describe. We have in recent years been privy to an increasing acknowledgement that 'reality' is inter-subjective and our experience of it socially produced and mediated, but what precisely does this mean for a global order characterised by entrenched power asymmetries and deepening rifts between the haves and the have-nots? Through an analysis of the practices of knowledge production about Afghanistan, and in particular, the way in which Afghanistan is thought about and represented in and by the Anglophone world, this study spotlights the interlocking and co-constitutive relations between knowledge production, racism and war.

With anthropology at the forefront, the last few decades have witnessed the mounting of a significant challenge to the systematic silence and evasion over the imperial-racial origins of the human sciences.[11] *Imagining Afghanistan* partakes in the effervescent conversation about social science's implication in empire, both past and present, and brings to the table a rather peculiar example

[11] For anthropology see especially Talal Asad, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (New York: Humanities Press, 1973); Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982). And to choose paradigmatic works from other disciplines: for sociology see George Steinmetz, ed., *Sociology and Empire: The Imperial Entanglements of a Discipline* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); for economics, Timothy Mitchell, 'The Work of Economics: How a Discipline Makes Its World', *European Journal of Sociology* 47, no. 2 (2005), 297–320; and for philosophy, Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

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of this implication.[12] This is the story of imperialism in Afghanistan, a story which is perhaps best designated as that which is the 'same but different'. It is the 'same' in that it displays, even exemplifies, a steady, if not quite consistent, lineage of colonial thinking about the Other. Afghanistan, in keeping with the rest of the Third or subaltern world, has been judged, represented and constructed according to those recognisable logics of mystification, hierarchy and fetishism. However, Afghanistan is not merely the Orient of Edward Said's *Orientalism*; it is also the *dis*Orient. This difference stems from what I refer to as its *quasi-coloniality*; Afghanistan is a not-quite colonised entity, situated at the margins of colonial thought, praxis and policy, and it has been subject to a form of the euphemistic 'indirect rule' that turned out to be every bit as invasive as 'direct' rule but was never fully operationalised.[13] Afghanistan, I submit, has been marked by the presence of empire, which mutated into an absence and back again, as if by demand. This book is thus an account of the imperial politics of knowledge production about Afghanistan, a place which, although of immense geo-strategic significance today, remains under-studied or inadequately studied.

There are two lacunae in the study of that I have identified, and I aim to make two corresponding moves to address these.[14] The first is largely conceptual. As a study fuelled by an interest in ideas, perceptions and representations, the project critiques and challenges the conventional empiricist, and specifically positivist, wisdom of social science in which the world is experienced in terms of an ontological distinction between physical reality and its representation. My perspective is different from the 'constructivist' or 'constructionist' viewpoint that argues that the world is 'socially constructed'. The world *is* socially constructed, but power and privilege – through the practices of representation – 'socially construct' non-European Others and 'bring them into the world' in specific ways, as subordinate, as ancillaries or as unimportant. If in the age of modern technology, the world has become a 'picture' or an 'exhibition',[15] then this 'staging of the world'[16] circumscribes the very

[12] Here my interlocutors are largely those working in the fields (or more accurately the fringes) of politics and international studies.

[13] On the concept (and misnomer) of 'indirect rule' initiated by the British in India, see Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[14] At various points in the book I employ the accepted distinction between international relations and International Relations (IR) to refer to global politics and the corresponding discipline respectively.

[15] Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), 115–54; Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

[16] Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

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conditions of possibility for the Other in interesting and complex ways. My contention is that this modernist metaphysics – where the Other is always represented and (pre-)given a part to play – must be understood as part of the 'colonising project(s)'.[17] This book, then, was conceived as a 'decolonising' intervention or 'corrective' in the broadest possible sense: it challenges us to rethink and ultimately unlearn the colonising impulses of knowledge production in the Western academy.

Through an analysis of popular and academic narratives about Afghanistan – which routinely appear in newspapers, policy documents and academic publications – addressing certain topics including, for instance, the status of women (Chapter 4), the 'warlike' nature of the tribes (Chapter 3) and the failure of the Afghan state (Chapter 2), I endeavour to show how these narratives simultaneously present and represent a world; that is, how they concurrently create a reality and allege that they stand 'independent of that same reality'.[18] This is a classic sense-making or 'nomos-building' manoeuvre: the bringing of the marginalised subject into being through a generative discourse, the constructed nature of which is immediately disowned and disavowed; and the invention of this subject, through practices of representation, reframed as the 'discovery' of the subject. In the assertion of independence by those doing the representing, difference is fossilised through a series of reiterative and enunciative acts, most notably through a proliferation of essentialist tropes and stereotypes about the Other. Distance and disavowal become much easier to sustain in this world-as-exhibition.

The first gap operates at the level of theory or meta-theory; the second 'gap' is rather less rarefied and has to do with the place Afghanistan occupies in the world described above. Afghanistan's geo-political salience in the age of the so-called War on Terror is unquestionable, but it remains shrouded in mystery, almost as a sort of obscure(d) object of violence. Afghanistan is mostly dealt with as a 'policy' or security problem, seemingly posed uniquely in the twenty-first century. While the last decade has witnessed the growth of some excellent (and much needed) scholarship on the region, these works are mostly historical in orientation.[19] What remains missing is a coherent body of work dedicated to analysing how an assemblage of practices of representation and

[17] I am deliberately referring to the 'project' as a 'colonising' and not a 'colonial' one, for three reasons, and firstly to stress the ongoing and the seemingly inexorable nature of colonising practice, foregrounding continuity instead of distinguishing between colonial and post-colonial epochs. Secondly, the concept subsumes under it practices that may not be strictly 'colonial' but follow similar logics, such as the ghettoisation of black communities in the USA or the clamping down on Maoists in India. Thirdly, it (re-)centres representation and discourse as key to this hegemonic, but not uncontested, project.

[18] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[19] Martin Bayly, Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, Benjamin Hopkins and Timothy Nunan are exemplary in this regard. This study has benefited greatly from their prolific (and expanding) oeuvres.

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interpretation, sometimes deliberate and always political, took root and has come to shape a particular 'idea' of Afghanistan in the Anglosphere.[20] The unmistakable portent of these representations – and the corresponding 'idea' – is of more than academic interest. At its most basic, the carving up and hollowing out of Afghanistan as a policy issue is a prominent manifestation of the academic-military complex, a relationship with a long history but one that has found renewed vigour in the War on Terror. There is a demand for 'practical' knowledge, which is produced and utilised overwhelmingly for military purposes.[21]

Notwithstanding the ethical concerns that the production of academic expertise for purposes of war gives rise to,[22] the immediate need for 'solutions' to the Afghan 'problem' – alternately apprehended as the failure of the state, the upsurge in terrorist activities, the internecine feuding of 'tribes' and the plight of women and children – has resulted in what may be called an 'emergency episteme'. Afghanistan 'experts' were born virtually overnight, rushing to fill the vacuum of knowledge that the country found itself in or, more accurately, to correct the vacuum of its own knowledge about Afghanistan that the Global North discovered, as if unexpectedly. The need to rapidly produce and digest material on Afghanistan was especially urgent because the country had been largely neglected in the years immediately before 11 September 2001 (9/11) for reasons of political convenience and imperial indifference, and it reflects something of a trend when it comes to the country. This requirement for 'quick data' also signals an underlying imperial anxiety in the face of ambiguity, a danger emanating from what Homi Bhabha has called the 'partial gaze' of the coloniser,[23] and is in effect a continuation of the legacy of what I ascribe to Afghanistan's quasi-colonial status. The coloniser's gaze, always *parti pris*, is attenuated further in the case of Afghanistan. With the country established as an ancillary to 'empire proper', efforts to taxonomise it and make it intelligible have been sporadic and patchy, based on political expediency and colonial caprice. This makes Afghanistan's position in the wider discursive Orientalist apparatus a curious one: scripted and

[20] For an enquiry into the 'Anglosphere' as a community of English-speaking states, nations, and societies, conducted from a post-colonial perspective, see Srdjan Vucetic, *The Anglosphere: A Genealogy of Racialized Identity in International Relations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). Vucetic's Anglosphere encompasses Canada, Australia and New Zealand, but as established the scope of *Imagining Afghanistan* is rather more limited.

[21] Academic 'intel' is also, of course, used for non-military 'management' of the conflict not least by NGOs, think tanks and diplomats.

[22] For an overview see Hugh Gusterson, 'Do Professional Ethics Matter in War?', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 3 April 2010. See also Nancy Lindisfarne, 'Culture Wars', *Anthropology Today* 24, no. 3 (2008), 3–4.

[23] Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October* 28 (1984), 125–33.

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circumscribed according to the logics of Othering, it is nevertheless something of an anomaly in its departure from the recognised genealogies of the sustained and penetrative restructuring of most other (post-)colonial societies.

The above-mentioned Center for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska, Omaha, founded in 1972, is still the world's only permanent research and training centre devoted solely to the study of Afghanistan.[24] Set up to counterbalance the Soviets, following a lull in the 1990s, it found a renewed sense of purpose after 9/11. The centre has since provided 'training on Afghan history, culture, and language to U.S. Army Human Terrain System teams that were departing for Afghanistan'. It has trained over 600 military and civilian personnel to prepare them for service in Afghanistan. It also helped 'professionalize' members of the Afghan National Army between 2008 and 2010.[25] Similarly, Indiana University recently inaugurated a National Resource Center for creating Pashto-language materials, focusing on providing 'key training for U.S. forces in Afghanistan'. Gene Coyle, a retired CIA officer, who has never worked in Afghanistan, serves as director. That requirement is written off as incidental because, as Coyle proclaims: '[w]hen a guy stands up and says, "I spent 30 years in the CIA and dealt with hundreds of foreign officials – trust me, this knowledge is really going to help you", it carries a lot more street cred'.[26] Incidentally, the Indiana University programme provides only ten days' worth of training – enough Pashto and Dari for students to learn the alphabet and 'basic cultural competence including religious beliefs and appropriate behavior toward women'.[27]

To problematise the 'story' of Afghanistan that emerges from ventures such as these – characterised by desultory interest and superficial engagement – and the silences, erasures and the occasional giant leaps of logic that inhere within it is a second (arguably more important) aim of my study. In a sense, this second lacuna is the lacuna of Afghanistan; under-theorised and over-determined Afghanistan is hastily and unjustly constituted as a problem needing to be fixed, as a failure that needs to be corrected. *Imagining Afghanistan* is situated at the interface of geo-politics and culture, and shows how practices of knowledge production about the Other are deeply implicated in the imperial present. A slightly different intellectual map can be drawn of this project, in the form of the two questions that invigorate it, as delineated below.

[24] The small private American Institute for Afghan Studies (AIAS) in Boston, founded in 2003, may be considered an exception by some, but its limited mandate and output make it at best a partial exception.
[25] According to the website of the Center for Afghanistan Studies, http://world.unomaha.edu/cas/ (last accessed 30 August 2018).
[26] Ibid.
[27] This information can be viewed on the National Resource Center's web page, http://newsinfo.iu.edu/news/page/normal/13033.html (last accessed 19 January 2019).

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What Is Critique?

This text is first and foremost a *critique*, to employ what has now become a fashionable and over-used term.[28] It is a critique of the practices of knowledge production and cultivation about the non-Western world through their particular application within a delimited space: that which we refer to as 'Afghanistan'. By critiquing these practices and processes of knowledge generation in the Anglosphere, I do not seek to repudiate or overturn the present conceptions of Afghanistan and replace them with more accurate perceptions, but to complicate this 'truth' about Afghanistan and also to make a small contribution towards an understanding of how this truth emerged and came to be widely accepted. The book, then, asks vital questions about regimes of power in order to assess claims to truth, not to refute them as simple untruths, but to excavate a more complex story about how some discourses materialise and cohere as hegemonic systems of truth, and in their wake delegitimise and subjugate other discourses and knowledges.

The thinkers whose work has most animated this project have all stressed the importance of critique. I tread in their footsteps and underscore that critique is not equivalent to criticism; critique is always active, always by someone and for a purpose.[29] I understand critique to be a situated practice that challenges the taken-for-granted and opens fruitful avenues and new ways of thinking about the ubiquitous and coercive knowledges that shape our imperial present. From this vantage critique is best viewed as an insurgent form of scholarship, as a decolonising project of political engagement that recognises the imbrication of the ethical and the epistemological, or the intellectual and the political.[30] This is much more than negative polemic, although it may incorporate an element of polemic if the occasion demands.

But What Is Afghanistan?

The question 'what is critique?' is perhaps secondary to a rather more difficult question: 'what is Afghanistan?' Afghanistan possesses a singular (but

[28] 'Qu'est-ce que la critique?' was the title of Michel Foucault's lecture of 27 May 1978, given before the French Philosophical Society.

[29] This is hardly a contentious claim and can be found across the works of Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler and Timothy Mitchell, to name a few prominent theorists.

[30] I am painfully aware of using 'decolonising' as a figurative expression rather than a literal prescription, precisely in a manner that is abhorrent to those at the front lines of the decolonial project in settler colonial sites. Once again, we rub up against the inadequacy of the current vocabulary, even in spaces (at least nominally) committed to a radical politics and social justice. For more on this see Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012), 1–40.

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