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Benjamin D. Hopkins, Magnus Marsden. *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. x + 301 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-70246-1.

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Historically, the Afghan frontier has been imagined and mythologized as the antithesis to modernity and order: a land of roaming tribesmen and religious fanatics. Today, these images are even more pronounced as the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan is most often characterized by violence, lawlessness, and Islamic radicalism. However, as Benjamin D. Hopkins and Magnus Marsden demonstrate in their new book, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*, the “ignorance, romanticism, and conceptual lethargy” that buttress these myopic tropes fail to accurately convey the complexity and heterogeneity that are defining features of the frontier (p. 1). By analyzing the experiences of local and colonial states, and foreign powers, in conjunction with the various groups of people who inhabit the frontier, Hopkins and Marsden shed new light on the rupture between how the “frontier was conceptualized, mapped, and deployed” by local, colonial, and foreign powers, and the ways in which the region’s people “perceived, interacted with, and profited from it” (p. 2).

Hopkins and Marsden’s work is ambitious considering the inherent weaknesses of conventional historical and anthropological approaches to understanding the frontier. However, by bridging the disciplinary divide, they accurately depict the “frontier as an encompassing yet internally differentiated arena where diverse polities, peoples, and cultural influences have interacted with one another” (p. 17). They divide the book into two parts. On the one hand, Hopkins’s historical chapters focus specifically on the creation of the Perso-Afghan border, the creation and impact of imperial imposed “traditions,” and the manners in which the “Hindustani Fanatics” defined the attitudes and actions of the colonial state toward its Muslim subjects. In each of his cases, Hopkins shows

that the state’s arguments about territoriality, tradition, and religion were fundamental in explaining how local and colonial powers understood and shaped the frontier. Marsden’s anthropological chapters, on the other hand, provide a more intimate depiction of everyday life on the frontier. By analyzing the “tours” of the Chitrali people, the interaction between travelers and local Chitralis, and the transregional migrations of frontier people into Afghanistan, Marsden sheds light on how the region’s people were shaped, and continue to be shaped, by interactions with local states and foreign powers, as well as with each other.

Mobility is a central theme of this book, and the authors’ interdisciplinary approach is fundamental to this analysis. By shedding light on the role of mobility on the frontier, Hopkins and Marsden unearth the “complex dynamism of a space continually occupied, defined and redefined by the people, communities and political entities that claim it as their own” (p. 2). They aim to breakdown stereotypical depictions of the “Af-Pak” frontier and its people occupying a singular, homogenous space, or being a non-space caught between “real” spaces, such as South or Central Asia (p. 3). To achieve this, Hopkins and Marsden paint a richly detailed mosaic of a region and people that are not merely fragments of empires or marginalized groups, but rather a *mélange* of overlapping spaces made from fluid communities that are bonded and interconnected through space and time.

Hopkins’s historical chapters examine the efforts by states to control and influence people’s mobility on the frontier, especially through the creation of political boundaries. For example, in chapter 1, Hopkins’s analysis of the formation of the Perso-Afghan border reveals

that the border marked the point at which Persian and Afghan rulers “assumed, to differing degrees, the characteristics of modern Westphalian states in their rhetoric and aspirations.” However, the delineation of the borders was not simply imposed by British imperial authorities, but was “subverted by indigenous actors who populated it with local notions, creating a hybrid political order” (p. 25). Inevitably, the creation of new spaces of political authority transformed the frontier. This is the true value of Hopkins’s historical contribution. He powerfully demonstrates that for people on the frontier the creation of borders “marked a transition from a political universe based on indigenous and Islamic norms of order to one increasingly defined by European norms of statehood” (p. 47). Political control was increasingly grounded in physical space and territoriality, not relational bonds. Although local actors would continue to contest and reformulate claims made by the local and colonial states alike, life on the frontier, including one’s mobility, was forever affected by this transformation.

Marsden’s anthropological approach balances wonderfully with Hopkins’s historical analysis as it reinforces how mobility and states’ attempts to control and influence it still define and shape the complexity and heterogeneity of the frontier. For example, in chapter 5, Marsden examines the “tours” embarked on by the people of the Chitral region in Pakistan’s frontier. Chitrali tours, trips either to a friend’s home in a nearby village or a grand journey over a mountain pass to stay in a stranger’s home, are important rites of passage for the Chitrali people. They are the Chitrali people’s way engaging with and understanding the frontier’s social heterogeneity, and they demonstrate how mobility “informs the social construction and continual reconstruction of

the Frontier” (p. 112). But tours go beyond the understanding of the frontier; they also provide glimpses into how Chitralis perceive of and engage with the wider world. As Marsden so thoughtfully explains, Chitralis often “subvert rather embody” the values, norms, and ideologies that colonial authorities and national governments use to define the frontier, especially concerning Islam and Islamic doctrines that dominate perceptions of the frontier (p. 112). On the contrary, Chitrali people expect “one another to question, reflect upon, and interrogate the conditions of their everyday lives” (p. 135). Thus, tours embody the mobility that is central to life on the frontier and how that mobility is essential in shaping the complexity and heterogeneity of those who inhabit the frontier space.

Although the book is divided into two parts, each featuring the methodological approaches of the respective disciplines, the book remains cohesive, and more important, convincing. The dual approach provides nuance to a critically understudied region of the world. We as readers come to see how the frontier was created, shaped, and continually influenced by local and global powers over the last century and a half. This insight alone goes far beyond any other studies of the region.

Fragments of the Afghan Frontier should stand as a fundamental text for students of Afghan history, as well South and Central Asia. It also is a major contribution to studies of frontiers and borders in general. But maybe more important, this book should be standard reading for the policymakers who still view the frontier as a homogeneous, singular space inhabited by tribesmen and religious fanatics, too easily, and wrongfully, identified as the embodiment of the Afghan frontier.

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