Ethnicity in Afghanistan: Questions from an interview study

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Content

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1. The study

In Northern Afghanistan a political grassroots dialogue on the peace process.

49 semi-structured interviews

No identifiable effect from ethnicity

Some interviewees linked ethnic discrimination only to the interference of international actors in Afghanistan

Counter-intuitive in light of international policies
2. Ethnicity and Afghanistan

Literature

Barfield (2010, 2005)
Bird and Marshall (2011)
Schetter (2003)
Barth (1996)
Kymlicka (2007)

First:

Afghanistan not the Balkans
2. Ethnicity and Afghanistan


Afghanistan:

International policies: Pervasive ideal type model beginning from the Bonn 2001 peace process.

Schetter: Ethnicity in A not an important reference for identity; ”Not a natural constant of human being”

Fluid and ”democratic” political archeology
2. Ethnicity and Afghanistan

Qawm

Taburwali

Strong nationalism

Decentralization

Never colonialized!

No need for nation-state historiography.
3. What?

Obvious: Ethnicity not natural or universal nor is it purely relativistic.

Ethnicity’s connection to the social, economic and political context varies?

Nationalism can exist free of ethnic categories?

Ethnic inequality only a projection of the social system? Why is ethnic inequality maintained? What social processes does it serve, if the Afghans do not have it? Why can the reproduction of inequality be built on ethnicity but not in Afghanistan?
One Answer or H1

Per Molander already mentioned, Originally from Ibn Khaldun (14th century):

Only surplus creates hierarchies, Afghanistan still largely subsistance based.

But, mobile phones, complex trade and knowledge networks across the country and the region, a strong desire simply not to produce any unnecessary economic surplus and surplus invested in social relations.
Another answer or H2 – 1/6

Basics: Simmel (1908) and Durkheim (1889): belonging to overlapping social circles both a condition of structure AND of the freedom of individual.

-> Gordon (1964) whether the social-structural and cultural elements of ethnic inequality are congruent is an empirical question AND in principle individuals can identify with groups that they neither structurally nor culturally belong to.

-> Now, another question is whether the social and political context allows them.
**H2 – 2/6**

Parsons (1966): In this order: Civil rights -> political rights -> social rights.

→ Citizenship becomes a control pattern of rights, controlling interaction of different group memberships and thus reproducing differences.

→ Citizenship becomes the base of social inequality in democratic societies. Parsons: Ethnic definitions high in the membership space of modern democratic societies. Aggregates further to economy and politics.

→ Hierarchy created.

Simmel *modern* individual freedom based on possibilities to compare groups, on having a hierarchy, to choose. See picture
→ Ethnic boundaries endogenous to or a product of a social structure based on universal citizenship guaranteeing individual freedom.
Afghanistan: the opposite YET guaranteed by nationalism.
Ethnic boundaries constantly maintained by individuals
→ In A ethnic boundaries define, not the other way around, and therefore also challenge the social-structure.
→ Has been devastating in Afghanistan because western policy was based on the official state structure to code and maintain ethnic boundaries, which immediately insults the INDIVIDUAL freedom of Afghans to maintain and change ethnic boundaries individually.
H2 – 4/6

Historically: rise of multiculturalism and ethnic groups tied to interest, rationale, economy, nation etc. Barth’s ethnic boundary maintenance $\Rightarrow$ symbolic ethnicity ensures inclusion into structural membership. Therefore ethnicity, according to Gans (1979), is seen to enrich individual freedom (the freedom to equally belong to any group is enforced) and stabilize the structure of the society.

Moynihan and Glazer (1975) continue and connect ethnicity to the political system. Ethnicity mediates structural configurations to the political system $\Rightarrow$ interests mobilized around ethnic groups. And then also ethnic groups being used for mobilization.
H2 – 5/6

But, in Afghanistan structural membership means rather being Afghan and having the right to personal political archeology, which ensures individual rights to the use of various ethnic interpretations. Displayed for example in how the political levels are subject to differing ethnic feelings/interests and the Pashtun example.

Simplification: Not ”All Afghan, all free but ”All Afghan, all what they want to be” Freedom, in regards ethnicity, mainly an individual characteristic, not societal.
H2 – 6/6

Last Example:

In the US ethnicity defined in layers (Russian doll model): A Chinese immigrant’s daughter: Zhuang, Chinese, Asian-American (Bös 2004) (Thus ethnicity subject to layers)

Afghanistan: ethnicity defines layers: Tajik and his Pashtun neighbour: Friends on a village level, enemies on a regional level, friends again on national level.
Conclusion:
Ethnicity in Afghanistan has a very different relation to the social, economic and political structure.

(Waters: *Ethnic Options: Choosing identities in America.* (1990) to an extent personal choice is possible, but not for all Americans and only between the structurally defined official ethnicities. A person or a group is not free to mould his own ethnicity from the existing symbols and culture and for different situations.)
Kiitos!
Barfield: Afghanistan is one of those places of which people who know the least make the most definitive statements about