'Unlawful Instruments and Goods': Afghanistan, Culture and the Taliban

First published in Capital and Class No. 78. 2002

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Introduction
In December 1998, an official notice was placed in a local Herat newspaper in western Afghanistan. It reported that a ‘number of unlawful instruments and goods’ had been seized by the local authorities and burned. These items included televisions, cassette players, VCRs and thousands of tapes. It also included ‘musical instruments and accessories’. In February 2001 reports first came in of the Taliban leaderships’ policy of destroying the Buddhist statues at Bamiyan, as part of a wider destruction of the pre-Islamic cultural heritage of Afghanistan. Mir Ghulam Navi, a curator in the National Museum of Afghanistan recalls how, in March 2001, ‘They (the Taliban) came with 10 men with hammers and began smashing the sculptures of human forms. We couldn’t stop them – they said they would kill us if we tried. It was miserable to watch’ (Anon 29/11/01). It is clear that the rule of the Taliban was not germane to cultural freedom and expression. However, this simple recognition does not take us very far in understanding why these events took place. How and why did such policies geared towards cultural repression and the destruction of pre-Islamic culture come about? How do we begin to understand the logic of such policies?

A ‘dialectic of the local and the global’ (Giddens 1991) suggests that global processes have local implications and affect the way people live and act. In trying to understand the cultural universe that designated musical instrument and the like as ‘unlawful instruments and goods’ we can apply three levels of analysis for such a dialectical account. Firstly, the general political, economic and cultural context within which (often global) agencies act and conflicts are played out. Secondly, the specific cultural policy content that is maintained by the various governments and cultural agencies locally. Thirdly, we can point to the actions of communities in these specific locales, in terms of the texture of peoples’ everyday lives.

Context
The widest and most general contextual features are the economic, political and cultural processes of globalization. These include the globalized nature of political relations between nation states, the increased global nature of social, political and economic processes, the distribution of global wealth, and the cultural expansionism of the West and resistances within certain regions/locales. The combination of these features bring new dynamics and a new politico-cultural universe or ‘constitutions” (Hardt and Negri 2000). The economic and political consequences of these global processes for Afghanistan are well known. Economically, Afghanistan has not benefited from global processes. Politically, Afghanistan has been relatively isolated until the recent fall of the Taliban. Culturally, Afghans resist Western expansionism in various ways before, during and since the Taliban’s rule. To explain these processes in greater depth is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the argument developed below can be seen as a case study in exploring the specific local impact of these global contextual features. For instance, western criticisms of the cultural repression perpetrated by the Taliban were seen as hypocrisy by some Afghans. They asked, why does the West care so much about some statues, but care nothing about the misery of the Afghan people. This was at a time when the country was in the grip of its worst drought for 30 years, 12m people were said to be affected,
3m were said to be on the brink of starvation and UN sanctions were still in place (Harding 3/3/01). Global markets have encouraged the illicit trade in cultural artifacts out of Afghanistan over the past 20 years to both official western cultural institutions and private collectors. The western markets for cultural artifacts and the unofficial local supply is but one emanation of the major contextual factors that affects Afghan cultural heritage. Peshawar in northern Pakistan is described as a ‘centre of underground trafficking in Afghan antiquities’ (Miles and McLennan 2001). Two years ago 2,500 items were seized by customs officials at Peshawar airport, destined for London, as were dozens of items from the Buddhist Gandaharan civilization from 1,500 years ago (Burke 11/3/01). Souren Melikian is a cultural historian of central Asia and arts editor of the Herald tribune. He is quoted as saying that the Taliban’s policy of destroying pre-Islamic culture provided ‘... a convenient smoke screen for the mass looting of the land, an operation that can be carried out only with the happy connivance of lower and mid-level authorities’ (Miles and McLennan 2001). There appears to have been a convergence of interests between the global markets for cultural artifacts, the Taliban’s cultural policy hostile to anything other than (their version of) Islam, and the local smugglers.

UNESCO’s attempts to preserve the world’s cultural heritage are part of the context within which this is happening. Many signatories to the World Heritage Convention take responsibility for the preservation of cultural heritage sites under their jurisdiction. Countries often want World Cultural Heritage status to improve tourism and national prestige. The context within which UNESCO operates is a highly politicized one, although UNESCO argues that it lacks the teeth to use in the preservation of world cultural heritage. On 27/3/01 an UNESCO press release (no 2001-48) declared the determination to favour Afghan cultural heritage despite the destruction ordered by the Taliban. Political pressures were ranged against the Taliban leadership in the face of this destruction. However, as we know this was ultimately unsuccessful. This context is beginning to impact on the policy content of UNESCO, as calls to make cultural and heritage damage a crime indictable in international criminal tribunals. Given this context, the local significance of cultural NGO’s such as The Society for the Protection of Afghanistan’s Cultural Heritage (SPACH) and the Afghan Museum and Institute (AMI) have grown. They have had to develop their policies as the Afghan situation has developed.

The political context within which the Taliban operated was one of almost universal condemnation. An especially vociferous condemnation is found in comments about their policies towards cultural and gender issues. Given this context, Taliban appeared to see ‘heritage terrorism’ as a way of ‘sticking two fingers up to the West’ motivated by a ‘mixture of revenge and reproach’ (Acherson 4/3/01). This response only really makes sense in a context of increased globalization and global communication. As Tomlinson has pointed out, cultural globalization is characterized by increased ‘connectivity and proximity’. This is the context in which such symbolic gestures as those pursued by the Taliban can and do have the desired affect (Tomlinson1999). This globalized context has had other local affects on Afghan culture.

When they came to power the Taliban banned music. The roots of this ban can be traced back to the refugee camps in Pakistan after the Russian invasion of 1978. Traditional Afghan culture has it that the only significant rite of passage that is not accompanied by music is a funeral (Wroe13/10/01). In the refugee camps of the 1970’s and 1980’s, many people were in mourning. It became seen as inappropriate to play music at any time. The internal dynamics within the Taliban and the specific policy content they developed was affected by this context. We should also note that music occupied an uncertain position in Afghan culture before the rise of the Taliban (Wroe13/10/01). As a result of understanding the wider context, the logic of defining musical instruments as ‘unlawful’ begins to appear less inexplicable.
Content
The specific policy content of the Taliban, western cultural institutions and NGOs can be clearly positioned in the general context of global events and conditions. An assessment of this policy content can be seen as a set of relatively autonomous variables that are influenced by these wider contextual features.

The content of the Taliban policies towards culture has been described by The Independent as ‘a cultural holocaust’ (Anon 29/11/01). On visiting the National Museum of Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, an assessment could be made. In March of 2001, in a ‘final, iconoclastic phase’, the Taliban went on a spree of destruction in the museum. Teams of men, including two ministers, reduced Afghanistan’s pre-Islamic cultural heritage to rubble. The specific cultural policies content was one of cultural repression, destroying all pre-Islamic images and artifacts, the denial of basic rights and cultural participation of women. This appears to be the specific local derivation of both a local interpretation of Islamic Law, and the ‘heritage terrorism’ referred to above.

The policy content of UNESCO revolves around a commitment to the preservation of world cultural heritage. Their response to the destruction of Afghan cultural heritage was from within this remit. In general terms, UNESCO plays an advocacy role to mobilization political and legal resources to try to prevent ‘cultural vandalism’ and ‘cultural terrorism’.

In responding to the plight of Afghan cultural heritage, the policies of NGOs such as SPACH and AMI have been geared towards being more ‘hands-on’. They appear to have a policy content that has taken a more curatorial role. These NGOs have tried to collect the cultural artifacts from Afghanistan and formed a ‘museum in exile’ (Miller 18/11/01). To some extent, this policy content is at odds with the orthodox UNESCO policy of non-purchasing. The policy content of these Western cultural NGOs towards the specificities of Afghanistan are to collect and store as many cultural artifacts from Afghan cultural heritage and archeology as possible. It is to provide a curatorial role that resists the privatization of Afghan cultural heritage as a result of private western collectors and to rebuild Afghan cultural heritage when the local situation permits.

Community
If by community life we mean the quality of life and interaction for ordinary Afghan people, then it involves the individual identity and lifestyle choices open to people, the ways open to people to interact and join together in common cultural activity, the felt experiences in peoples’ everyday lives and the impact that systems of governance have upon these factors. It was perhaps one of the unique features of the Taliban’s cultural policy that they involved themselves with controlling such levels of detail in the way people led their everyday lives.

However, it has been reported that some Afghans willingly contributed to the destruction of pre-Islamic cultural artifacts, even before Mullah Omar’s edict. The reasons why people may have demonstrated this personal commitment to the destruction of their own cultural heritage in such a totalitarian culture is a very big question and beyond the scope of this piece. We should however remember that communities have routinely turned on their own cultural heritage throughout history, usually for politico-religious reasons. In reporting the destruction of the Afghan cultural heritage in the Observer, Neal Acherson writes, ‘Anyone inclined to priggishness about the Taliban’s mass execution of statues in Afghanistan need only visit the Lady Chapel at Ely. There, Puritan hammer-men obliterated the heads of saints, prophets and angels. That chapel remains one of the most heartbreaking sights in England’ (Acherson 4/3/01).

We should also remember that some of the cultural prescriptions characterized as Taliban cultural policy stem from a period that pre-dates the actual political rule of the Taliban. For example, the cultural position of women and the denial of their cultural rights is a more common cultural factor in Afghanistan and is unlikely to change quickly after the end of the
Taliban. Similarly, the ban on music was to some extent a function of wider and deeper cultural history and experience, rather than the result of specific cultural policies of the Taliban. The experiences of the refugee camps and the association of lack of music with respect for the dead has contributed to the ambiguous relationship to music within the community as a whole. This is not to take a relativist position on the cultural policies of the Taliban. It is clear that the quality of cultural life suffered greatly under their repressive regime. In this situation, many members of the Afghan community played an active role in trying to preserve the cultural heritage of the country. The AMI report approaches from academics and museum officials going back to 1998 ‘...begging (the AMI) to find a way of saving those antiquities that remained’ (Miller 18/11/01).

Despite some of the current ambiguities towards music, the Taliban’s ban on music represents a denial of a part of community culture that has a very long and rich history, which has played an important role in the rites of passage of peoples lives. Music played an important role in keeping ethnically diverse group within Afghanistan together.

*One of the few areas where a pan-Afghan identity has emerged is through popular music, which is a hybrid of the Pashtun musical style with a lot of Tajik language. This music, particularly as broadcast by the radio, brought together these two groups (Wroe13/10/01).*

With the Taliban’s bans on cultural life, community culture went underground. Much cultural life continued in secret. Cellars in rural homes were used as music venues, people held illegal video showings. The Guardian tells of Sultan Mahmood, a cinema manager who in 1996 hid away 50 films with the arrival of the Taliban (McCarthy 20/11/01). On the 20th November 2001 he re-opened his cinema and started to show his films again. Bollywood films and Titanic are very popular. However, the film he showed on the 20th November was an Afghan film, starring Afghan actors and was made by an Afghan director.

Women faced the most severe forms of cultural oppression under the Taliban regime, so it is perhaps not surprising that they have been involved in informal forms of resistance as well. The men of the family were the sole breadwinners as women were barred from working. Women were also barred to go out in public without a man. In families where the father had been arrested, young women and girls took on the role of breadwinner by pretending to be boys. Other women continued with banned cultural practices in secret. Rida Azimi was a TV newsreader until the Taliban banned women from working. During the Taliban’s rule, she turned here small apartment into a secret beauty parlor (McCarthy 22/11/01).

The wearing of burkas became the cultural symbol of the repression of women. With the fall of the Taliban, the wearing of the burka is no longer compulsory, but many women appear to be continuing to wear it. This is an indication of the felt experience of many women in the present situation, as well as the fact that some women appear to wear the burka voluntarily. It indicates that community level cultural action in specific locales is not always the result of actual policies, but is as much about received traditions of behavior and practical considerations. However, some Afghan women argue that the fact that compulsory wearing of a headscarf rather than a burka is seen as liberation is only really testament to the deeper denial of cultural and political rights. As Sahar Faba, of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan is quoted as saying, 'Wearing a headscarf is just like wearing a burka. It is force. You must have the right to choose' (McCarthy 22/11/01). At the community level of analysis, the lives of many of the women of Afghanistan are unlikely to change very much with the fall of the Taliban, if the general cultural traditions are any indicator.

To summarize, we can suggest that the community level of analysis reveals a finer detail of cultural action and motivation, which context and content levels of analysis do not reveal. The community level of analysis shows the importance of the experiential factors such as the texture of everyday life and the multiplicity of the meanings of cultural action.
Given this brief analysis of Afghan culture and the Taliban, we can make the following points with regard to the way that these 3 levels of analysis stand in a dialectical relationship to each other.

**Context – Content Dialectic**
The global economic situation, the drive towards economic development and the world markets for cultural heritage artifacts impacts upon policy content and makes cultural heritage protection policies such as those pursued by UNESCO necessary. This global political and economic context creates a particular reaction from the Taliban and impacts upon their policies towards cultural life and heritage. This in turn leads to a questioning of the policy content towards heritage artifacts by global cultural organizations. Cultural NGOs such as SPACH and AMI feel the need to develop specific policy content to protect Afghan cultural heritage within this context and move towards a purchasing strategy. UNESCO policy content changes to call for the making of ‘cultural vandalism’ an indictable crime. This global cultural context makes ‘cultural terrorism’ and the specific policy content of destroying pre-Islamic cultural heritage meaningful for the Taliban. The historical context within Afghanistan means that the Taliban inherited certain cultural traditions that they translated into specific policies. Each time the bodies pursue their specific policy content in the situation of such global tension, the general contextual problems become compounded. Each local reaction to global contextual issues compounds the global tensions and reproduces local conflictual positions.

**Context – Community Dialectic**
The general historical, political and cultural context in Afghanistan after almost 30 years of conflict impacts upon the everyday cultural freedoms and colours the local responses to western calls for cultural tolerance. Global contextual processes which led to the Afghan wars and inter-Afghan conflict mean that communities engage in pro or anti-Taliban actions regarding their (cultural) policies. This generates further local conflicts. Failures of western development agencies to complete development after the Soviet withdrawal, and the ensuing local military conflict helps to consolidate certain local anti-western cultural tradition and gesture politics. The Taliban’s destruction of Afghan cultural heritage along with the global markets for cultural artifacts leads to local actions such as the smuggling of heritage goods out of the country. Local cultural actions such as those carried out by the Taliban affect the global perceptions of Afghanistan and contribute to political, economic and cultural isolation, helping to reproduce internal cultural anti-westernism.

**Content – Community Dialectic**
Policy content from development agencies and NGOs, and the lack of development affect the community’s quality of cultural life and the local protection of cultural heritage. The Taliban’s cultural policy represses community culture. This leads to informal community resistance and to the generation of alternative cultural activity as a response. The specific Taliban’s policy of destroying Afghan cultural heritage encouraged an increase in smuggling activity at the local end of the illicit global trade. Policies for the re-building of cultural artifacts and heritage interact with community development, needs and capacities. Such local capacities will either encourage or discourage such cultural rebuilding projects.

Developing such a dialectical account enables a broader and deeper understanding of the cultural situation inside Afghanistan during the Taliban’s rule. Such a dialectical account can more clearly situate against the backdrop of the global context an analysis of the local
events. It also enables an understanding of the micro-levels of cultural action within peoples everyday lives to be situated within this wider account. A dialectical account is also a way of hearing ‘other voices’, to show more clearly how everyday aspects of culture can be forms of resistance. Despite the cultural repression of the Taliban, this resistance continued. So such a dialectical account enables one to go beyond the immediate repudiation of the Taliban’s cultural policies. To understand the general context within which the Taliban came to power and the inter-relationship between this and local actions enables the development of a more nuanced and subtle account of the variety of those local cultural actions. It also enables a clearer understanding of how such local responses can help to reproduce the conditions that gave rise to them initially.

Any attempt to understand the meaning and motivations of the Taliban needs the depth and breadth of analysis that this dialectical account can offer. It is too easy simply to repudiate. Any attempts to alleviate similar situations in the future will similarly need as full an understanding as possible.

References


