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**The Fall of Kabul in 2021: Background, Effects, Resonance**  
**Der Fall Kabuls 2021: Hintergründe, Effekte, Resonanzen**

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Afterword

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## Afterword

Mira Menzfeld

The articles in this issue tell us a great deal not only about Afghans themselves but also about anthropology as a subject – a discipline that may not instantly resonate with all readers. The articles indirectly corroborate an observation by Alessandro Monsutti (2013), which is still valid today: that the manner in which anthropological studies on Afghanistan are carried out allows conclusions to be drawn about the potentials and challenges currently facing cultural and social anthropology as a discipline. This does not apply solely to the anthropology of Afghanistan; but it does apply here too. When anthropologists write about Afghanistan for an interested public, their reflections and arguments offer insight into the discipline itself – for both laypeople and experts. Anthropological texts on Afghanistan evoke both traditional and current themes within the discipline.

### On *Unheimlichkeit* (unhomeliness/uncanniness)

The articles by Martin Sökefeld, Fatima Mojaddedi, and X. point to what is the nature of and how we approach that which is *unheimlich*. They show in various ways that, for people in conflict zones, different senses of *Unheimlichkeit* can be closely linked: *Unheimlichkeit* in the sense of homelessness, but also that of fundamental uncertainty and insecurity, or even that of the involuntary shudder when faced with something that has become completely alien. Sökefeld writes about how it can, ironically, improve the situation of refugees if more and more atrocities occur in their region of origin. And he discusses the highly arbitrary, sometimes inhuman official definitions of security based on what levels of *Unheimlichkeit* are tolerable, definitions that can themselves be a new source of insecurity and cruelty for refugees. For refugees, it is not just the homeland they have left behind that is *unheimlich* and threatening, but also the mechanisms and internal logics of their destinations. X.'s text is written from the point of view of a soldier, who is assigned a higher risk status in his country's hierarchies of death (Levy 2019) by virtue of his occupation. The text is concerned with military ways of dealing with *unheimlich* threats and places. It also shows how inadequate the security for military action often is, so that each security operation simultaneously (and paradoxically) contains moments of greatest possible insecurity. Mojaddedi, for her part, reports on elemental insecurities and dangers which are imprinted metaphorically and literally on Afghanistan's soil. These must be dealt with if people are to carry on living – though this life can only ever be lived in and with the *unheimlich*.

Aspects of the *unheimlich*, such as alienation and uprootedness, hopelessness and homelessness, threat and perceived threat, the eerie and the monstrous, have long been themes of anthropological works. An interesting attempt to frame *Unheimlichkeit* in anthropological terms can be found, for example, in Robert Levy's studies on Tahiti. His research partners there distinguish between normal fear, which can be classified as part of the mundane, tangible world, and a sense of the uncanny, which has fundamental and existential dimensions. The latter shakes the whole structure of everyday life and is experienced as an unpredictable 'terror in the face of the uncanny' (Levy 1973: 152), assailing people from outside their habitual contexts. When elemental threats can no longer be grasped in familiar categories but transcend and even threaten to destroy the everyday things one takes for granted (such as family, places, the familiar workings of the world, the routines of its inhabitants), then, according to this understanding, what is taken from people in uncanny/*unheimlich* situations is not simply their physical homeland and security – which causes fear – but much more. This is when terror in the face of the uncanny dominates. Mojaddedi's text explores the changing meaning of Afghan soil, from nourishing homeland to mutilating danger, which people must nonetheless use to support themselves as best they can. This shows how the familiar and life-giving has been warped into something alienated and destructive in war-torn Afghanistan. At the same time, the article highlights the grotesque transformation of fertilising substances: originally intended to increase the productivity of mine-free land, these have instead been used as one of the basic ingredients of improvised destruction, that is, of bomb-making. Readers with an interest in Martin Heidegger may remember at this point that the *unheimlich*, in his theoretical constructs, is closely linked with the fundamental fear of nothingness, and of what he calls *Unzuhausesein* or 'not-at-homeness' in the world – where the thing that is most *unheimlich* is always one's own death (Heidegger 1967). Being in a homeland that has become alien and encountering the possibility of one's own death at every step – when one wants and needs to gain sustenance from the land that was once familiar – is an uncannily inescapable burden. One's own country becomes an endless deathtrap, as one of Mojaddedi's research partners put it.

Even in areas where there is no war, we find that terminally ill people closely associate dying, homelessness, and *Unheimlichkeit* (see Menzfeld 2021). In war and displacement, however, it has a different meaning, when the familiar living conditions of the homeland are overturned and suddenly become *unheimlich* and unsafe, because something is threatening one's life or cutting one's body. In war and displacement, the known and familiar often return in grotesquely distorted form, in the Freudian sense of the *unheimlich*, and are never again available in the longed-for original form; they remain alienated and lost (Freud 1919). Not 'only' is one's own existence threatened, but everything one knows and lives in is destroyed or damaged. Well-known

classic studies (Evans-Pritchard [1931] 1976) and more recent work (Crapanzano 1980) on phenomena of the *unheimlich* are often concerned with non-human actors and forms of being, such as spirits. In contrast, the uncanniness and insecurity explored by the authors of these articles are entirely of this world. The events that shake frames of reference are devoid of any magic and instead banalise and brutalise; the actors that threaten and deny lives and homelands here are hostile government agencies, warring parties, people who unthinkingly contaminate nourishing soils with poison and land mines. People's own living spaces and contexts of meaning are threatened by other people who have grown up in very similar circumstances. The terror of the *unheimlich* destroys familiar structures and is often enormously alien and alienating, but it can also wear a disturbingly familiar face.

### Border crossings

Noah Coburn and Arsalan Noori, Magnus Marsden, and Heela Najibullah contribute to a conceptualisation of emic self-positionings and etic localisations of Afghans and their modes of experience, which transcends geographical and generational boundaries. Coburn's and Noori's portrait of a small Afghan town helps us consider Afghanistan beyond the city limits of Kabul – and also beyond the capital's political power relations, which are not necessarily identical to those in other regions of the country. By portraying a space that is neither city nor country, the authors challenge and disrupt platitudes about Afghanistan, such as that of a binary social reality consisting of urban versus rural populations. At the same time, the long-term focus of the text offers insight into the background of and prior histories behind the local response to the latest regime change.

In doing so, the article reminds us that it is not adequate to conceive of the 'fall of Kabul' as a singular disruptive event with a clear temporal boundary. In this linguistic reduction of a complex regime change to the military fall of the capital city of a nation state – a motif that also features in the title of this special issue, because it is handy and readily understood – there are echoes of what used to be called 'methodological nationalism'. The term refers to the tendency – not necessarily one to be recommended – to assume that the nation state is the obvious social and political form (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002). This way of thinking is also reflected in the fact that, in some languages, the capital city of the nation state can stand for a whole country and its inhabitants. But not only do national politics and power not take place simultaneously everywhere and for everyone, as Coburn and Noori make clear; they also do not necessarily remain within neatly drawn national borders. Marsden's text shows not only that power dynamics within the Afghan national borders follow their own local rhythms, but also that connections beyond the country's borders, across Central Asia and even

globally, influence how local power relations are constituted and perceived. Conversely, Afghan local dynamics cannot be fully understood without an understanding of the connections with the outside world. This is particularly true of the Taliban (see also Hartung 2015, 2016), whose scope for influence and action can only be understood in the light of supra-regional social and idea networks – even though, for outsiders, they only seem to be entrenched in one small corner of the earth.

Marsden's text also draws attention to how complicated the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are in relation to borders and demarcations in general. This is an old theme of anthropology, but one that is currently being reinvigorated by the integration of the concept of the border into analyses of active border production, for example in the context of migration studies (Fischer et al. 2020). In contrast to previous phases of the debate, anthropologists today try to capture processes of containment and delimitation and border crossings in ways that transcend ethnic and state borders, to avoid thinking in categories that are assumed to be fixed. This allows more accurate assessment of the affiliations and limitations that influence people, beyond well-worn (and in some cases false) patterns of attribution.

Lastly, in a text from the diaspora, Heela Najibullah draws our attention to how experiences of violence – both for those inflicting and those enduring them – shape the lives of Afghans, even in exile, even far beyond the territory and the time when the experiences of war took place. She gives a voice to people who show how entanglement in the tragedies and struggles of the homeland that has been left behind stays with people across national and generational boundaries. This indirectly revisits the concept of collective trauma, widespread in relation to war contexts (Hirschberger 2018; Robben and Suárez-Orozco 2000), and uses concrete statements by individuals to make tangible its cyclical, inter-individual effects. All this is described from the point of view of an author whose own story has been shaped, intergenerationally, by Afghanistan's conflicts. This fact has had a lasting impact on her and her research, as she indicates in her article: in 1996 the Taliban publicly executed Najibullah's father, the former president of Afghanistan; and persecuted other, mainly male, members of her family. In her article, Najibullah deploys a scholarly gaze, taking an equal interest in all stories and paying equal attention to the interpretations and experiences of war on both sides: those who have fought on the jihadi side and those on the same side as her own family. In doing so, she transcends the boundaries of conflict narratives passed down within families. Heela Najibullah's remaining female relatives are now spread across many different countries, whilst she has built her life in Switzerland.

### Acting in crises

In their respective papers, Parin Dossa and Conrad Schetter look at two very different groups of Afghans: women who want and need to remain capable of action in the midst of displacement and war; and self-appointed holy warriors who, in this shattered country, want to establish not just a specific new political order but an all-encompassing way of life. In the first instance, these two texts help us understand, in a general way, patterns of action which occur in many conflict zones, not just in Afghanistan. The articles go beyond simplistic images of heroes and victims, and help readers comprehend the complicated dialectics, logics, and (survival) strategies that mark extended periods of war. The articles describe how people with broken biographies carry on – or start anew – in varied ways. They highlight forms of struggle and hope, which aim at other futures than those that are available at the present moment.

Both these authors strive successfully to historicise, contextualise, and retrace the responses to the crises they portray. This contextualisation is important if we are to understand the internal logics and influences that motivate the victims and the (apparent) victors of recent and past hostilities, resulting in things that are not necessarily comprehensible to outside observers. For example, that people are proud of those who have smoothed the way for them by deciding to blow themselves up; or that people decide to stay on and feed their families in spite of everything, even though their sons are leaving the country and they do not know how they will manage to buy vegetables the day after tomorrow. Whilst someone who does not know the region might interpret at least the former as irresponsible and even reckless, there is always more under the surface they cannot perceive (see Edwards 2017, 2002).<sup>1</sup> Schetter's and Dossa's texts illustrate, amongst other things, structural and symbolic, but also very personal preconditions for those possibilities and wishes which people and groups in Afghanistan have developed and continue to develop – both by those who are often referred to as perpetrators and by those described as victims.

It can also be said that Dossa and Schetter illustrate two forms of antifragility (Taleb 2012),<sup>2</sup> that is, ways of dealing with fundamental shock by taking a new approach to the given circumstance, in situations where resil-

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1 Noah Coburn (2016) and Lawrence Rosen (2011) describe such disastrous misinterpretations of local logics of action.

2 Nassim Taleb describes antifragility and its relationship to resilience and robustness as follows: '[T]here is no word for the exact opposite of fragile. Let us call it antifragile. Antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same' (Taleb 2012: Prologue). Antifragility, therefore, does not mean the return to a better state but a creative response to uncertainty, disruption, and crisis.



ience (Barrios 2016)<sup>3</sup> is no longer imaginable. Resilience as a return to a more stable state might not be possible anymore, for example, because the thing one might wish to return to is no longer there, or because all one has ever known has in itself always been in a terrible state of instability. At the same time, the two authors remind us that there is nothing fundamentally morally positive about carrying on and building up in the face of war, nor is it necessarily morally questionable to stop acting out of sheer horror.

## Conclusion

I can still remember an intervention Atal made during one of our first conversations: ‘The people in Europe don’t understand how you can go with the Taliban. Because they don’t know what it’s like when you have to choose whether to die for the right cause or protect your family and stay alive. For example, you Europeans only ever look at Kabul. But not everyone in Afghanistan is a female doctor from Kabul.’ This highlights two problems which this special issue has attempted to tackle:

- A lack of understanding for ‘hierarchies of death’ and the weighing up of suffering in conflict zones.
- A certain perceptual focus, in the Global North, on areas and individuals that people in the Global North can identify with.

These are just two of the things that often lead, in Europe, to distorted perceptions of the reality of life in Afghanistan.

The concept of hierarchies of death (Levy 2019) primarily describes the deliberations of groups, states, and individuals involved in conflicts, when it comes to deciding which people should or can permissibly be exposed to what risks and probabilities of death. In a war, not everyone has the same probability of being killed. And not everyone has the same opportunity to have a say when it comes to their place in such hierarchies of death. The weighing up of hierarchies of death does not take place only at the level of military leaders or that of parliaments, however. It is a dynamic process with many variables, and ultimately it also occurs when an Afghan man asks himself, waking up every morning, whether he would rather see his own children starve or give in to the pressure and join the people who see themselves as being on the side of God. Or when someone considers where they would rather risk death: on an unsafe escape route, or in the fight against overwhelming adversaries. If we can avoid trite, overhasty judgements and try to comprehend hierarchies of death with all their tragic implications, then we may gain a slightly better understanding not only of Afghanistan but of life in wartime in general.

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3 Resilience is usually understood as the return to a more stable state, similar to the situation before the shock. In a critical overview, Roberto Barrios (2016) defines resilience as the qualities and capacities that enable a community to recovery from a catastrophic event.

Atal's cousin decided to stick with the Taliban, that is, with the people who seemed to offer him and his family the best chance of a safe and bearable future. It is a decision that is not so absurd under the given circumstances, even if, objectively, it is far from the right choice. Understanding such decisions and how they have come about does not mean denying the atrocities committed by many Taliban fighters. But it is part of the bigger picture to see that not all members of the Taliban or former supporters of the *mujahidin* are irrational or bloodthirsty. To classify them sweepingly and overhastily as cavemen or lunatics (see, for example, Bloomberg 2021; Merkur 2022) is to misjudge reality in at least two ways. First, it makes us confuse people who act out of necessity with those who are inherently dangerous. This is not only unjust, it also produces new security risks: the more people we perceive in a generalised way as a threat, the less we can deal strategically with those who are a real threat and help to make them less threatening. Second, it is unwise to underestimate people by dismissing them as being from the 'Stone Age' (Bloomberg 2021) or 'mad' (Merkur 2022), as their actions are, in many respects, carefully planned and logical. This was one of the mistakes made by those who were genuinely surprised by the rapid territorial gains by the Taliban and still wondering why they could not be stopped.

Most people find it hard to imagine how people elsewhere perceive the world, how they feel, and why they act as they do. This is normal. In childhood, people develop an astonishingly good 'theory of mind' (Kienbaum and Schuhrke 2010), that is, an idea of what other people are thinking. And practically everyone has the basic biological and cultural-social prerequisites (Röttger-Rössler and Markowitsch 2008) to imagine – with astonishing success – what others are feeling. But of course we only acquire these abilities in relation to the thoughts and feelings of the people who live in our immediate vicinity. And so we never really learn how to put ourselves in the shoes of people from other cultures and realities. Just as our native language is well suited to making ourselves understood in our home country but is of little help several hundred or thousand kilometres away, our intuitions about the motives and feelings of other people can be of little use in other countries and societies.

In other words, all our ideas about how life works are acquired in very specific contexts – but they accompany us everywhere, even far beyond the context of our home country, to places where they are no longer useful. Furthermore, people have a tendency towards homophily; that is, they are more likely to recognise, perceive, and even appreciate what seems familiar (McPherson et al. 2001). This applies not only to tourists and (even) anthro-



pologists<sup>4</sup> but to anyone who consumes popular media and hears discussions about, for example, Afghanistan. This is why, when it comes to the subject of Afghanistan, many try to understand things that they can relate to easily – for example, the lives of educated and relatively wealthy people, which are similar to the way people live in the Global North, as Atal noticed. In concrete terms, this means a tendency to concentrate on city dwellers who, for example, used to run elegant restaurants or manage surgery units before the Taliban came to power. ‘The misery of such women affects you, because you perhaps understand it a bit,’ says Atal. Clearly, many people from the Global North are particularly moved by the fate of Afghan women; some are even determined to save them (Abu-Lughod 2002; see also the article by Dossa in this issue, for example the section on ‘The irony of history’).

As the articles in this issue have shown, however, Afghanistan’s population is not primarily composed of university-educated families who take to the streets for the right to continue their education and enjoy their success. You learn that when you listen to Atal, too. Some Afghans have less of a problem with the Taliban than with the fact that their crops are drying up more and more often, he says. Others hate the Taliban because of how some Taliban clamped down on the farmers’ trade in opium poppies and stopped the farmers from sending their crops to the opiate addicts of this world. And there are also women who do not want to be rescued, but who support the Taliban, for example because the Taliban guarantee them safety whilst they work in the fields.<sup>5</sup> Paying closer attention to certain safety needs of female agricultural workers does not in any way relativise the demands of university-educated urban women for freedom to pursue their careers, and it does not make these demands any less urgent; but it transmits a more realistic picture of all facets of ‘the’ women of Afghanistan, who – from a Western perspective – are still too often seen as a group that is uniformly in need of rescuing, with a questionable degree of agency (Abu-Lughod 2002).

Anyone who wishes to understand Afghanistan, then, should strive to comprehend, at least on a rudimentary level, the internal logic of decisions such as those of Atal’s cousin. This does not mean approving of them. But it helps us to understand other people’s actions, thoughts, and feelings more accurately. A tolerance for ambiguity – that is, recognising and tolerating both one thing and the other in their simultaneity, instead of wanting to radically

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4 For non-anthropologists who would like a brief overview of anthropological work and discussions of how what we observe is influenced by what we perceive as self-evident, I recommend the following websites: <https://hraf.yale.edu/teach-ehraf/an-introduction-to-fieldwork-and-ethnography/>; <https://userwikis.fu-berlin.de/display/sozkultanthro/Ethnologischer+Standpunkt>. Both are also good for further browsing.

5 The information presented here comes from background conversations with Atal and other Afghans in Switzerland, whom I met in the context of my research on digital religion and on Salafis and jihadis from 2019 to 2021.

eliminate one or more of the ambiguous or contradictory aspects (Häcker and Stapf 2004) – is important if one is interested in what is happening in Afghanistan. The intuition we have developed in our own life context is, in any case, a blunt instrument when it comes to understanding the feelings and thoughts of people who are – on multiple levels – far removed from us.

### A final plea

The articles in this issue explore various nuances of the events in Afghanistan and the lives of Afghans. The authors take the people they are writing about seriously. They respect them in their fundamental humanity, regardless of whether they approve of their positions and actions. And they try to understand them. It is this approach that allows the articles to inform us and help us form well-founded ideas and opinions on the events in Kabul in August 2021. They therefore offer an example of how the tolerance for ambiguity can function without coldness, and lead to understanding without trivialisation. Indirectly, the texts urge us to tolerate, regardless of our own opinions, the fact that there are people who think and act in radically different ways to ourselves. If we are interested in a peaceful world, we need as many people as possible to recognise this fact. It simply will not work otherwise – neither with the conflicts in Afghanistan nor with the wars and displacements elsewhere in the world. If complex problems are to be mitigated, they must first be understood – preferably without dehumanising those whom we fear and dislike. Anthropological perspectives can help to pave the way for this desire to understand, without confusing it with the shrugging indifference of total relativism. If we want a more precise understanding of the world we live in, it is worth listening to people who are experts in understanding others.

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