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Afghanarchism: What American Radicals Can Learn From the Pashtuns

Nicky Reid

September 24, 2021

There is a narrative commonly held by observers in the west that the Afghans are a people defined by perpetual warfare. Like many stereotypes, this one comes with a cornel of truth. After all, the people of Afghanistan just got done throttling the bare hind quarters of the greatest empire Satan ever devised for the last twenty years with little more than rusty Soviet junk and raw grit. The rural highlands of southern Afghanistan have certainly fostered a distinctly martial culture that has aided its people in resisting generations of conquest, but to simply sum these people up by the wars they've fought completely misses the context of why they fight and what they were fighting for.

You see the Afghan people, in particular the Pashtuns who have made up the bulk of the Taliban, are a people who simply refuse to be ruled by anyone or anything besides their own distinctly stateless culture. The Pashtuns of Afghanistan's rugged borderlands are essentially anarchists and their successful cen-

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Retrieved on 7th October 2021 from www.counterpunch.org

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

turies old resistance to conquest didn't begin with the Soviets or the British or even Alexander the Great. It began with the first taxman sent by a local emir to those mountains, who was returned riddled with bullets for his trouble.

The rugged mountainous region now separated superficially by the Durand Line forming the border between what is now modern day Afghanistan and Pakistan has always been a distinctly wild country populated by hard men who love their rifles and hate being told what to do. This region was traditionally known as Yaghistan which roughly translates to the land of lawlessness and rebellion. But this title was clearly bestowed upon the rural Pashtuns by another simple minded outsider, for even though these people are certainly stateless, they are anything but lawless.

Pashtun society is governed by a strict code of honor known as Pashtunwali, or the way of the Pashtuns, which is upheld by decentralized local councils of elders and religious figures known as Jirgas. For centuries it has been the Jirgas and the Jirgas alone which have governed the land of lawlessness by settling disputes among the tribes. Every other form of rule has been stubbornly rejected and successfully resisted. No single entity has ever managed to hold a monopoly on the use of force in those mountains and many have tried. It wasn't until the 1940s, with advent of tanks and aerial bombardment in the region, that a central Afghan state was even able to successfully quell a tribal uprising and this fire superiority only gave Kabul the upper hand for a few decades before the Pashtuns could outfox them.

This is the real reason why 99% of all Afghan central governments, be they foreign or domestic, have failed, and this is why the Taliban has, against all logical odds, succeeded twice in consolidating power against seemingly insurmountable opposition. Despite this motley crew's crude brand of cruelty, they have always respected the rural Pashtun's iron will to rule themselves. And the Pashtuns in kind have found the Taliban's

unique services to be quite useful. The Pashtuns view of the state is remarkably similar to that of their fellow Islamic anarchists in Somalia's short lived Islamic Courts Union. They will tolerate the existence of a central power provided that it is purely used as a voluntary means of neutral conflict resolution.

The Pashtuns come to the government, and never the other way around, solely for judicial reasons, to seek an impartial third party to judge tribal disputes and prevent permanent warfare, and even then they do not seek out the traditional carceral role of a conventional western justice system, but merely a means of conflict resolution. It is only at the behest of the Pashtun anarchist Jirgas that the Taliban exists, not the other way around, and the Taliban knows it. The only reason these tribal renegades don't seek to overthrow power in Kabul is because they don't need to. Through pure force of will they have rendered the state totally irrelevant to their way of life and this is a phenomenal achievement.

This is not to say that Yaghistan is some kind of utopia. I did not choose to write this piece as a blind defense of some romanticized western view of the noble savage. Rural Pashtun society is rough and cruel. They have little respect for women and absolutely no use for Queer people like myself. Like many societies in Central Asia, theirs is rife with deep seated rivalries and seemingly endless blood feuds. But none of these flaws can take away from the fact that those people have made an astonishing achievement simply by existing as they do. The Pashtuns have succeeded where anarchists from Catalonia to Ukraine have failed. They have remained unruled for centuries under the constant bombardment of violent state meddlers of every conceivable variety. Kabul has been occupied by monarchs, communists, and capitalists and the borderlands have remained anarchist.

I can't help but to be inspired by this magnificent achievement and yet most of my fellow left anarchists are too consumed with identity politics to see these people as anything

but backwoods savages in desperate need of western anarchist condescension to cure them of their evil ways. I don't like the Pashtun approach to most social issues myself but for me, as an American transwoman, to assume I have the solutions to these specifically indigenous problems is nothing short of intellectual colonialism and only serves to further highlight why so many bougie white westerners have failed where the Pashtuns have succeeded. Internationalism is a convenient distraction from local autonomy.

So how do we do it? How can first world anarchists succeed like the Pashtuns have? What is the secret to their success and could it ever translate to the modern world? I believe that, at least on some level, it can. The Pashtuns have succeeded against all odds because they have constructed a culture defined by statelessness where as many others have developed cultures defined by subjugation. Anarchism is more than just politics to them, it is a way of life as old as the mountains themselves. This kind of deeply cultural anarchism can't be manufactured. A bunch of white kids can't just grow beards and move to the mountains. But many, if not most pre-existing cultures, even in the metropolitan wastelands of the west, have their own unique stateless roots that can and should be tapped into.

This is particularly true in the live-free-or-die countryside of rural America. We need to foster our own unique spirit of independence tied to our own local cultures and the distinct bioregions that defined them. This could be something as old as the hillbillies of Appalachia or the Mormon pioneers of the Desert. For me it's something as post-modern as my fellow Queer hicks in the rural Rustbelt, and it could be something even more niche than that, so long as it's authentic and it has local roots. It should always be remembered that there is nothing Kropotkin can teach you that the land can't teach better.

From there we don't so much as rebel as we simply live. The Pashtuns never waited for some grand revolution to smash the

state, they simply existed in spite of it like the Amish with Kalashnikovs. The new tribes of American anarchism need to do the same by creating parallel institutions that provide alternatives to the resources the state uses to blackmail and control us. We need our own currency, our own economy, our own schools, militias, agriculture, and perhaps above all else, judicial systems. One thing the Pashtuns learned long ago that is universal is that we do not exist for the state, the state exists for us, and it's only as powerful as we decide it should be.

As for the Afghan people themselves back in the war torn Hindu Kush, I'm not worried. They've survived far worse things than the collapse of another foolish imperial project. The Taliban are bastards and the Chinese can be every bit as rapacious as any western empire, but the Pashtuns don't need them. If the Taliban becomes foolish enough to believe that Afghanistan can be an actual country like their assimilationist neighbors and Beijing becomes greedy enough to try to mine those mountains for smartphone making minerals, they have a history lesson to learn and the Pashtuns will be more than happy to teach it to them.