The Taliban and the humanitarian soldier
Configurations of freedom and humanity in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT: Humanitarian wars are a primary means of globally affirming a specific model of humanity, built according to the cultural, moral, and economic standards of Western democracies. How are forms of humanity produced in the context of humanitarian war in Afghanistan? How are notions of freedom mobilized? How does the idea of a prospective humanity relate to the use of military force? In an attempt to reflect on the different configurations of freedom and humanity that emerged in the context of recent Afghanistan conflicts and international interventions, this article addresses the perspective of two key figures: the Taliban and the humanitarian soldier. Building on narratives such as poetry, interviews, and conversations conducted during fieldwork, this angle allows us to observe the complexity of the Afghan humanitarian theatre in a way that goes beyond mere assessments of political and economic interests, revealing a fragment of global contemporaneity that is crucial for understanding how processes of producing humanity combine with war and humanitarian efforts.

KEYWORDS: HUMANITY, FREEDOM, TALIBAN, SOLDIERS, POETRY, AFGHANISTAN.

> Attention to the content of the idea of humanity, to the language expressing desire and affect when talking about humans, and the political reasoning used variously to demand their liberation or improvement, their protection or sacrifice, indicates how complicated the process of recognizing humanity is.
>
> Talal Asad, 2015

The year 2001 is often considered a major historical turning point marking a shift from a "before" to an "after" in modern history[*]. Following the attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent military invasion of Afghanistan via the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom, phenomena such as terrorism, war and counterinsurgency, securitization, aid, and border control have changed drastically at the global level. In Afghanistan, the attacks triggered a series of military operations by foreign forces and the creation of one of the largest humanitarian theatres in the world. As expressions of a transnational geopolitical force, notions such as reconstruction, the rule of law, democratization, and military intervention became humanitarian imperatives invoked not only for the sake of Afghanistan but also for the world at large.

The idea of the "just war" has been used by military powers for several centuries (Walzer 2006) as a rationale for justifying the use of force. In the recent history, it was evoked, for example, in 1991-1993 for the First Gulf War and in 1993 in Somalia. Humanitarian war – defined as "major uses of armed force in the name of humanitarianism" (Trimble 2018) – can be understood in continuity with the development of the just war doctrine. In

1993, Adam Roberts presciently wrote, "Humanitarian war is an oxymoron which may yet become a reality" (Roberts 1993). Indeed, with the 1998-1999 Kosovo war, the rhetoric of the humanitarian war gained widespread currency, politically and ideologically revitalizing the idea of military intervention as a "necessary evil" (De Lauri 2019). The entry of foreign troops into Afghanistan in 2001, and soon thereafter in Iraq in 2003 and in Libya in 2011, represented critical moments in the historical process of globally justifying military international interventions as "humanitarian" ones. Reframing war (and, in some cases, imperialism) through the language of humanitarianism has opened the opportunity for global players like the US, the UK, and France to consolidate a world order destabilized by the emergence of new powers and new actors. Evolving over the last three decades, the ethos of humanitarianism and that of militarism have merged to enhance a modality of international intervention explained by Western governments as a form of compassion and, at the same time, as a moral responsibility.

In this article, I examine two key figures in the context of recent conflicts and political turmoil in Afghanistan: the Taliban and the humanitarian soldier. These figures condense two crucial features of modernity: first, the capacity to concretely mobilize universal narratives; second, the intention to transform the world by the use of force (Gray 2003). But while the Taliban is generally seen as the premodern expression of a local doctrinaire form of Islamism, the humanitarian soldier appears as a global moral agent who embodies both the "humanitarian spirit" and the military ethos expressed in contemporary humanitarian interventions. Lying at the intersection of transnational political processes, identity politics, and religious ideology, the Taliban movement, which "remains one of the most elusive forces in modern history" (Crews, Tarzi 2008: 4), is instead a specific product of modernity, a political entity capable of enhancing a distinct global message. The humanitarian soldier, on the other hand, "can be seen as an embodiment of the international coalition's presence in Afghanistan, but also in broader terms an embodiment of the topical international order, and of the human rights-driven world politics of our time" (Kotilainen 2011: 39). The perspectives offered by these two figures serve as an entry point to explore the relationship between the different configurations of freedom and humanity that became prevalent in post-2001 Afghanistan, with effects reverberating globally. The narratives of the Taliban and the humanitarian soldier, interlinked with a key source such as poetry, add an element of complexity and immediacy to the historical and political analyses of events

in post-2001 Afghanistan. They challenge normative approaches to the study of the contemporary history of Afghanistan and expose the notion of humanity as a process of both world-making and everyday practice.

In the arena of humanitarian military interventions, the idea that humanity corresponds to a certain kind of collective effort, a common destiny (Fanon 1963) that is about to emerge, results in accelerated processes of producing humanity that are characterized by a certain degree of tension and similarity. In the introduction of *In the name of humanity: The government of threat and care*, Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin (2010) suggest that if everyone speaks in the name of humanity, then no one can ultimately monopolize its meanings. However, the Taliban and the humanitarian soldier – as paradigmatic figures of contemporaneity – do not simply speak and act in the name of humanity. They actively participate in configuring humanity in specific – often contrasting, sometimes overlapping – ways, in producing it as part of a radical intervention in the history of the present. What we see here is that humanity is not a "thing" but, rather, an aspiration, a political instantiation that produces a reality that will potentially exist in the future. We know that if there is an essence of humanity, it is multifaceted, historically variable, plastic, and contested (Ingold 1994; Jessop 2005). The appeal to humanity mobilizes discursive and material efforts to transform values, institutions, identities, attitudes, and conduct (Jessop 2005) in a way that is consistent with a precise vision of the future. In this logic of becoming, humanity is a path toward a forthcoming world.

To delve into the different configurations of humanity expressed by the two key figures of the Taliban and the humanitarian soldier, in this article I draw on interviews and conversations conducted during ethnographic research over a time frame of several years as well as poetry (written by soldiers, Taliban, and non-Taliban contemporary Afghan poets like Partaw Naderi and Darwesh Durrani) as a process of re-presentation (Faulkner 2009). I do not hold up these fieldwork narratives as something "representative" or claim that the voices of fieldwork interlocutors are some sort of general expression of the Taliban or humanitarian soldiers. Rather, I use interlocutors' narratives and poetry as an opportunity to raise specific concerns, for instance, the need to explore the production of humanity in circumstances of war and humanitarian intervention. In such an explorative attempt, I consider the poems included here as complementary to the ethnographic narration, verbal articulations of both an inner self and the collectivity within changing social and political environments.

Poetics and politics of humanity

Poetry, literature, and music have played an important role across different regimes in Afghanistan's history, mobilizing Afghan dynamics of perseverance and adaptation as well as anticolonial sentiments. During the British colonial period, for example, Afghan literature inspired and encouraged resistance and rebellions against the British and their patrons (Johnson 2007). During my first journey to Afghanistan in 2005, I had the chance to meet several Afghan poets from around the country and collect contemporary Afghan poems, which I then published in Italian (De Lauri 2005)[1]. In the forward of the book, Gianroberto Scarcia, a scholar of Oriental studies, wrote that the poems should not be considered as merely literary testimony of distinctive "cultural voices" or philological traditions but, rather, as testimony of circumstances and conditions of an era

> that is not Oriental nor Western, but entirely human. [...] The force and inspiration of these poetic compositions [...] belong to a language that, today, is of all of us (Scarcia 2005: 12).

Poetry is a form of art as well as a path through history. It plays a significant role in the formulation, expression, and consolidation of ideas of personhood in society (Olszewska 2015). Indeed, poetry is a journey into the social forces that produce specific forms of humanity.

Access to the popular literature of the Pashto, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, offers a chink through which to observe the social and political history of the country, especially for periods where there is a scarcity of other sources (Caron 2011). The collection *Poetry of the Taliban* (Strick van Linschoten, Kuehn 2012)[2], similarly gives us the opportunity to navigate a cultural universe that generally falls outside the reach of mainstream analyses about the Taliban in particular and Afghanistan more generally. Since its appearance in the 1990s, the Taliban movement has expressed and implemented brutal violence on a large scale. In parallel, it has also manifested a cultural understanding of humanity, which is to some extent recognizable in the autonomy of the movement's aesthetic, in "its general

1. The book includes the Italian translation of poems by Massud Rejai, Karima Vida, Abdul Raziq Roin, Partaw Naderi, and Fatema Akhtar.
2. Felix Kuehn, one of the editors of this book, writes in his blog: "No book is perfect, and there were some issues with ours. It turned out that some of the poems from the website that we published in the book were not written by Taliban members or even supporters. To me they are nonetheless just as relevant as the others, if only because they seem to have resonated with the editorial board of the website, which evidently saw this content as something they related to" (Kuehn 2014).

broadly human character, that links the Taliban to a wider world outside their ethnic and doctrinal limits" (Devji 2012: 12). An example is provided by the poem "Humanity" by Samiullah Khalid Sahak:

> Everything has gone from the world,
> The world has become empty again.
> Human animal.
> Humanity animality.
> Everything has gone from the world,
> I don't see anything now.
> All that I see is
> My imagination.
> They don't accept us as humans,
> They don't accept us as animals either.
> And, as they would say,
> Humans have two dimensions.
> Humanity and animality,
> We are out of both of them today.
> We are not animals,
> I say this with certainty.
> But,
> Humanity has been forgotten by us,
> And I don't know when it will come back.
> May Allah give it to us,
> And decorate us with this jewellery.
> The jewellery of humanity,
> For now it's only in our imagination.
> (In Strick van Linschoten, Kuehn 2012: 210-211)

A common claim in Taliban poetry is that the humble humanity of rural Afghans, harbored by their love for their land, is under attack by invaders (Devji 2012). Yet, as Sahak's poem suggests, the concern for humanity is more complex in Taliban literature, which displays a sorrowful awareness of the loss of humanity among Afghans themselves.

Beyond Taliban poetry, in the broader realm of contemporary Afghan poetry, we encounter different visions of the world, and we can trace the historical trajectory of major social transformations and epochal events as well as invisible transitions in ordinary life. Partaw Naderi, an Afghan activist and poet I met during my first trip to Afghanistan, was imprisoned in the Pul-e-Charki prison (the largest prison in Afghanistan, located east of Kabul) by the Soviet-backed regime for three years in the 1970s; shortly after his release, he begun to write poetry. His poems reflect the changing character of poetry as it survives to different political regimes. His "Chat Room of Politics", for example, expresses a political imaginary absorbed by the powerful framework of exported democracy:

Poor president has lost a lot of weight,
What can he do?
They crown him with a new wooly hat every year!
He is not to blame,
Water doesn't flow in the stream,
Democracy needs a flat ground
and a vast land
like the United States;
like our southern neighbor,
Pakistan.
Democracy doesn't grow in rocky lands,
Democracy must be Afghanised,
Like Rumi's Lion!
Let Afghanistan's stomach rumble for the food of democracy,
If this food does not cook in our pot,
Why is Karzai to blame?
Our pot is placed in the oven of tradition,
Democracy needs an advanced oven with bloody fires,
If the smoke of democracy has blinded us;
If waters have dried up from shame;
If school kids write in their notebooks: Two loaves of bread plus two loaves of
bread equals
            three cabinet posts;
It is not important!
What is Important is that Afghanistan has an elected president and,
a constitution untouched by the eraser!
The elected president is aware;
He breaths history;
And in the geography of national anthem he calls everyone by their true names.
In the Gulkhana Palace,
He does not fear anyone.
His proud wooly hat is bigger than the head of history,
When he kisses the hands of the father of the nation,
God knows what goes in his heart.
His chest is a house with no pillars where he cherishes sweet patience,
When Musharaf calls him an ostrich,
He bravely recites a poem:
"If you don't know my Afghan valor, you will know it once you face me on the
field."
But then he quotes the words of Ali:
"The greatest bravery is patience."
And when his diplomatic Chapan falls off his shoulders,
He writes in the chat room of politics:
Hey!!!
"Don't you disclose what is between you and me!"

(Naderi 2012)

Partaw Naderi provided to me with a privileged access into the realm of contemporary Afghan poetry. During our meetings, he often emphasized the need to recognize the political potential of poetry, both in its critical and transformative capacities. Naderi's poetry condenses both his social activism and his commitment toward democracy building in Afghanistan, without hiding the ambiguities of democratization.

Building on a different political and ideological position, Taliban poetry has also pointed to the ambivalence and ambiguity of democratization and the human rights claims made by coalition forces in Afghanistan. More recently (De Lauri 2019), I have conducted interviews with European soldiers who participated in humanitarian military operations in Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Africa[3]. Their concerns about the pitfalls of humanitarian wars and democracy promotion were not rare. During a conversation in June 2016 with Mario, a sergeant of the Italian army (*Esercito Italiano*) who spent fifteen months in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2005, he showed me some of what he described as his "personal, instinctive poems on war". In his poetry, he addresses the contradictions and hidden realities of humanitarian war. In one poem, "Still Fight", he asks, "Who is our common enemy?" – which proved to be a key question, as I will discuss later on, for under-standing the context of humanitarian military interventions. Of course, the abstract figure of the enemy permeates poetry in a transversal manner. An example is the 2001 poem "Oh Warrior of My Sacred Land" by Darwesh Durrani[4], a popular contemporary Pashto poet:

> Oh warrior of my sacred land
> the gun you bear on your shoulder
> has neither eyes nor feet.
> It steals your eyes to watch my step
> it steals your feet to track me,
> to blast a hole through my chest,
> to hear my dying cry with your ears.
>
> Oh warrior of my sacred land
> this gun you bear on your shoulder
> is it crippled, deaf and blind?
> Has it shed its eyes, ears and feet
> to take yours in their place?

3. My research among Italian and French soldiers was conducted in 2016-2017. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

4. According to Durrani, "Taliban poetry is seen as part of the 'people's poetry' genre in Pashto literature: composed by the people for the people. The language is simple and directed at Afghans leading ordinary lives. While, it provides fascinating insights into their feelings and concerns, Taliban poetry is generally not of a high standard [...]. They have simple images and concerns that touch a chord with the public" (Durrani 2012).

You may know nothing about this gun –
but I know that our mutual enemy
schemes in a land far away.
He schemes for us to destroy our brothers,
to smash each other's jaws with brutal force
while he is safely out of reach.
He wants to mix our blood with soil
while his blood stays unspilt.
He wants us to freeze each night on the front
while he stays warm by a fire.
This is how our enemy schemes:
leaving his body at home like a shirt
he comes to our land in the form of a gun.

Oh warrior of my sacred land
when this sinister, limbless enemy
comes to our land in the form of a gun
he doesn't come alone, but in hordes
exceeding the headcount of this land,
each gun roaming and shooting ceaselessly:
not one with a bone that could break,
not one with skin that could burn,
not one with veins that could rip,
not one with blood that could spill.
All its limbs are safe at home
and instead it uses our limbs here.
One gun pursues me with your feet,
another marks you with my eyes,
a third lies on another man's shoulder –
just as this gun lies on yours.
All of its limbs left at home,
it came with only its mouth.
The shoulder is yours but the mouth is his –
a toothless mouth that speaks in bullets.
But when a bullet pierces a man
he doesn't see that gun's toothless mouth;
instead it's your shoulder, your hand he sees,
he takes you for his enemy, not the gun:
and he seeks revenge from you.

Oh warrior of my sacred land
the gun you bear on your shoulder –
how much blood has it spilt on our land
and never been called to account?
You alone are blamed for this blood
and revenge is sought from you
as they hoist another gun to their shoulder
aiming the bullet from its mouth at your heart.

Oh you who crave the crown,
one day this bullet will piece your heart
you're edging closer to a coffin than a throne –
take care and think again
before the enemy hurls you in a grave.
To save yourself from this dark fate
you must know the enemy who plots your end.
I am your brother: our mutual enemy
lies on your shoulder, crippled, deaf and blind.
It watches my footsteps with your eyes,
it pursues me with your feet
to blast a hole through my chest
and to hear my dying screams with your ears.

(Durrani 2001)

Similarities and convergences among different actors – Taliban members, poets, activists, humanitarian soldiers – exist even beyond a level many would be willing to admit. For instance, the use of expressive writing for transformative experiences during war (Croom 2015) has historically revealed common sentiments between opposition fighters and soldiers. At the same time, however, the visions of humanity that inform political ideologies and action can differ significantly. The US-led military invasion and the massive humanitarian apparatus mobilized in post-2001 Afghanistan, on one side, and the Taliban, on the other, have played a prominent role in the new millennium's global discourse over the destiny of the world order and humanity. The notion of freedom as both a central narrative of modern societies (Oboe, Bassi 2011) and a commitment toward the future is key to defining the political and military efforts and the general public preoccupation that marked the years following the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York and the invasion of Afghanistan.

Struggle for freedom

In his effort to legitimize the US role in the First Gulf War, George Bush Sr. used his January 1991 State of the Union Address to Congress and the American people to assert moral claims:

Halfway around the world, we are engaged in a great struggle in the skies and on the seas and sands. We know why we're there: We are Americans, part of something larger than ourselves. For two centuries, we've done the hard work of freedom. And tonight, we lead the world in facing down a threat to decency and humanity (Bush 1991)[5].

5. For a broader reflection on the role of the US in the Gulf, see, for example, Atkinson 1993 and Little 2008.

Indeed, freedom and humanity are imperatives that are often used to justify the use of force (Zolo 2002; Douzinas 2007; Çubukçu 2018). Like Western military powers, the Taliban have made the struggle for freedom a key notion of their politics, but their specific concepts of what constitutes freedom contrast sharply with Westerners' ideas of freedom. In today's Afghanistan, the Taliban's discourse on "freedom from invaders" is enhanced in the context of a global narrative of liberation utilized by Western military forces. This has come to define the political arena of humanitarianism in Afghanistan as a space of negotiation and contestation of different political actors, including humanitarian agencies, foreign state actors, the Taliban, and the Afghan government.

For many Afghans, talking about the Taliban means engaging in communicative patterns of oral narration, poetry, and historical songs that rework individual experience into a collective one (Rzehak 2008). Since 2005, I have conducted several periods of research in Afghanistan, during which I have had the opportunity to meet former Mujahedeen[6] and various Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara former fighters. I heard several war stories about Taliban and told by Taliban. I met Amir for the first time in 2007; he was a 39-year-old trader who traveled between Pakistan and Afghanistan because of his work. A friend of friend introduced us, and our conversation took place in a house on the outskirts of Kabul. He told me he had been involved in Taliban politics "for many years," adding,

> It's part of my story [...] Most of my life has been spent in the struggle for the good of Afghanistan. Searching for the good I also found the evil. But only Allah can judge me for what I have done [...]. I am a Pashtun who believes in a free Afghanistan. The Taliban have struggled for the freedom of Afghanistan and continue to do so[7].

Amir used our first conversation to distinguish between the Taliban and Al Qaeda and to explain why the Taliban can (and must, according to him) still play an important role in Afghanistan's future. For Amir, rethinking his past implied, to a certain extent, revisiting the history of late 20th century Afghanistan. We began a long conversation that soon transformed into a lively exchange, animated by different perspectives about notions of politics,

6. The root of the term Mujahedeen is *jhd*, which means "effort", the same as the term *jihad*. Mujahedeen is the plural expression of the term *mujahid*, generally translated with "fighter" and, more specifically, someone who fights for *jihad*. In addition to its religious connotations, the term also refers to the person who struggles for the homeland, recalling the idea of "patriot". The Afghan Mujahedeen cannot be considered a unitary and compact group but, rather, a system of groups with different characteristics that fought the Soviets in a fragmented manner during the invasion and received external aid from countries such as the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and China.

7. Conversation with Amir, October 2007.

rights, freedom, and identity. I met Amir again in 2008, but in circumstances that did not allow for further conversations. The last time we met was in Kabul in 2014 on a grey afternoon, when dust and residue, stirred up by generators, dropped from the sky and acted as a mantle preventing any rays of sun from peeking through.

Amir's story is dominated by war. Unlike many Taliban[8], he did not study in a madrasa[9]. His life path took a precise direction during the turbulent two-year period between 1978 and 1979, when political antagonism and large-scale violence broke up his family. He lost his father and his older brother in a short time span. Amir was a child in December 1979 when the Red Army crossed the Amu Darya, launching the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the resulting intensification of Afghan resistance. Born in a rural area of southern Afghanistan in a village close to Kandahar, Amir was catapulted into the realm of fighting at a young age:

> Many of Afghanistan's children were holding rifles at an age when they still did not understand how far they could hit. When at the end of the '80s we Afghans finally expelled the Russians thanks to our pride and our courage, I felt there was no time for celebrations. Mujahedeen and warlords had gained a power they never had before and they were about to use it against Afghanistan itself. I have many scars. Just like Afghanistan has [...] When I was young I had a blind force, I fluttered against everybody without fear. Only later on I realized that moral strength based on the teachings of Islam is more effective than physical strength. This is what I actually saw in the rise of the Taliban: the rise of a moral strength in the face of warlords before, and invaders later[10].

In the rural areas where Amir grew up, the Soviet invasion exacerbated the erosion of the social fabric. It produced structural changes that saw traditional local authorities (such as the *khan*) progressively losing political weight to the benefit of commanders and warlords whose economic and military force was fueled by the heterogeneous "international aid industry" of external actors based in Pakistan. When the invasion occurred, riots and forms of resistance throughout the country assumed large dimensions, involving groups that had previously remained on the margins of internal struggles and antagonisms. The call to *jihad* to reject the invaders and oppose the Communist regime was a fundamental ideological element of the

8. Taliban, from *talib* ("student") refers to the students of madrasas across the Pakistani-Afghan border.

9. "In modern usage, the name of an institution of learning where the Islamic sciences are taught, i.e., a college for higher studies, as opposed to an elementary school of traditional type (*kuttāb*); in mediaeval usage, essentially a college of law in which the other Islamic sciences, including literary and philosophical ones, were ancillary subjects only" (Pedersen *et al.* 2019).

10. Conversation with Amir, October 2007.

fragmented Afghan resistance. In this scenario, new political actors – such as the Islamists[11] – emerged. Not only did they reconfigure local power structures, but they also had profound consequences on national and international politics. However, it was not possible to establish coalitions that could act in a coordinated manner on a large scale based on ethnic claims or by emphasizing the religious element. As Amir said, "division was the rule"[12].

The Afghan military, which corresponded, to some extent, to the Afghan "proletariat," was increasingly weakened by internal divisions. While the Soviets continued to bomb indiscriminately, causing the deaths of many civilians, the Mujahedeen and the Islamists were gradually armed and supported by external actors. From 1986 on, the US began to distribute more sophisticated weapons, such as Stinger antiaircraft missiles, to Afghan groups fighting the Soviets. In addition, the US gave them extensive intelligence, funding, and training programs (De Lauri 2012). Pakistani military intelligence services were deploying "aid" and trying to steer military operations. However, since resistance groups were not a unified force under a single leadership, the main function of Pakistani intelligence was to act as an intermediary by distributing weapons to the various groups. This contributed to enhancing the social and political fragmentation of Afghanistan by fostering the consolidation of power held by Afghan commanders. The new weapons made available reinforced the Mujahedeen's military power, which eventually undermined Soviet military superiority and pushed Moscow to seek a diplomatic solution to get out of the conflict without losing its influence in the formation of a new government in Kabul. However, at that time, the Afghan fighters refused any compromise and continued to accept aid from Washington. In December 1987, recognizing the impossibility of mediating a different deployment of its troops, Mikhail Gorbachev decided not to interfere in the formation of Kabul's new political government. On February 8 of the following year, it was officially announced that the Red Army would soon retreat.

Of course, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan did not mark the end of an era of conflict or the beginning of a lasting peace. Poverty and violence continued to afflict the people of Afghanistan, and internal fights between the various groups that contended for power characterized the so-called "Mujahedeen period." During our conversation, Amir commented:

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11. Although inspired by the Islamism of Abu Ala Maududi in Pakistan and Sayyid Qutb in Egypt, the Afghan Islamist movement has developed its own particular way, merging almost entirely with the anti-Western ideology developed by active groups in urban centers, especially in Kabul.
12. Conversation with Amir, October 2007.

> We defeated the Soviets and defended our land. But defending and building are
> different things. [...] For more than twenty years, the Taliban have tried to build
> a united and strong country. A country that in the name of Allah rejects the
> invaders and respects the only true law, that of God. [...] At that time, it was not
> enough to defeat the Soviets. The country fell into the hands of indecent
> figures who did not know how to govern. The Taliban government was a
> necessity, an opportunity that inspired me[13].

Amir's words echo a common rhetoric among many Pashtun sympathizers of the Taliban movement, that their "advent" resolved a situation of internal political anarchy and uncontrolled violence. The proliferation of armed and extremist groups had degenerated the already tense relations between Shiites and Sunnis in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, causing sectarian conflicts that mirrored the tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is in this historical context that the concrete foundations of what would become the Taliban regime were built, although some argue that Taliban ideology itself is rooted in the pre-1979 Pashtun villages in southern Afghanistan (Gopal, Strick van Linschoten 2017).

Between 1982 and 1992, thousands of people from other countries went to Pakistani refugee camps with the goal of reaching Afghanistan. They were volunteers who were engaged in the *jihad*. In addition to joining the fight with Afghan fighters, they had the opportunity to learn the Afghans' techniques and strategies of fighting, which the volunteers would later carry back with them to their home countries. In the controversial dialectic that saw Saudi and Iranians engaged in an attempt to expand their political and religious visions (that is, their respective spheres of influence), the role played by Wahhabism was certainly crucial. Wahhabism, a conservative religious reform movement whose origins dated back to the beginning of the 18th century had a particularly strong impact on Pashtun villages along the Afghan-Pakistani border[14].

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13. Conversation with Amir, October 2007.

14. Shivan Mahendrarajah writes: "Wahhabism is not mainstream Islam. It is a cult whose beliefs, but for the discovery of 'black gold', would have been practiced primarily by Arabian date-growers and goat-herders. [...] With increasing oil revenues, the Saudi state was well situated to export the cult's beliefs as 'Islam'. Wahhabi ideals were exported to Pakistani madrasas from 1980 onward. Puritanical reform as the device by which to create 'the purest Islamic state in the world' became the Taliban's raison d'être. There was no wholesale importation of Wahhabi doctrines; rather, concepts were borrowed, then adapted and tempered for the Afghan Pashtun political-cultural terrain. I classify this as 'Wahhabi-Deobandi' ideology" (Mahendrarajah 2015: 384-385).

In 1992, in a climate of antagonism and conflict, the Mujahedeen conquered Kabul. However, this did not stop the violent clashes between the various factions, the atrocities suffered by civilians, and the destruction of entire areas of the country. Given the fragile systems of alliances, betrayal and antagonisms led to hordes of refugees fleeing into Pakistan, Iran, and beyond, the dismantling of structures and infrastructures, the continuing weakening of the Afghan social fabric, and massacres of civilians. Against this background, the Taliban movement emerged in 1994. The Pakistani authorities facilitated the rise of a new force (Judah 2002; Rashid 2000), which was partly composed of refugees formed in Pakistan and who, through the Jamiat-e ulama-and Islam party, aimed to take power in Afghanistan. Funding from Saudi Arabia made it possible for this new force to receive logistical-economic support and military training. The US involvement in facilitating the establishment of the Taliban has also been emphasized[15]. Multinationals like the Union Oil Company of California (UNOCAL) were optimist about the rise of the Taliban at that time. The economic interests of foreign governments and large corporations were mainly related to the construction of a gas pipeline from the Caspian zone (particularly rich in gas and oil) through Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Kandahar was the starting point from which the Taliban could overtake the country. Pakistani interests in anti-Indian politics and trafficking and smuggling between Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asia, as well as the Saudi attempt to extend the Wahhabist boundaries to the region, coincided to create the ideal economic and political background for the Taliban's initial sphere of action. After conquering Kandahar, thousands of Afghan and Pakistani Pashtuns joined the movement, among them the elusive figure of the Mullah Omar, proclaimed the Prince of the Believers (*'amir al-mu' minin*), who became the Taliban leader. Thanks to continued Pakistani and Saudi economic support, the Taliban were able to persuade some local chiefs without even having to fight. Elsewhere fighting was harsh, causing many civilian deaths. Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Massud organized an anti-Taliban resistance (United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, or the Northern Alliance), which grouped several formations, including Abdul Rashid Dostum's Jumbish and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf's Ittehad, and settled in the northeast part of the country. Its stronghold was the Panshir valley. Once the Taliban successfully took Kabul (after hard fighting against the forces led by Massud), they established a regime of prohibition and repression legitimized by an instrumental interpretation of Islamic law. In addition to Pakistani policies and regional geopolitics, the Taliban found

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15. Jonathan Cristol neutrally describes the US-Taliban relationship in the mid-90s as "cordial" (Cristol 2019).

fertile ground in the internal political oppositions and ethnic rivalries that were rife in Afghanistan at the time. This was evident even after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, when, in some parts of Afghanistan, Pashtun groups that were considered responsible for the rise of the Taliban were targeted in episodes of violence and revenge (Simonsen 2004).

Indeed, a segment of the Pashtun population thought that the Taliban could represent an alternative to the uncontrolled regime of violence and anarchy of the Mujahedeen period. The chaos under the Mujahedeen was then replaced by a totalitarian Islamic regime, whose violence was legitimized in religious and moral terms. For many Pashtuns, the Taliban embodied the opportunity to recover a rural dimension that was disturbed by the system of warlords and the immorality of cities. In their view, the Mujahedeen had been unable to pacify the country and establish a "society ordered under the Shari'a government", as Amir told me, confirming the conservative spirit that met the vision of a mythicized Islam, which the Taliban regime promised to bring about.

Taliban narratives – in both their oral and written forms – have reproduced patterns of cultural transmission in Afghanistan, manifesting their world-view in ways that effectively resonate with Afghans. As illustrated by Thomas Johnson (2007), *shabnamah* (night letters) are good examples of these narratives. The Mujahedeen used oral narratives and night letters to solicit opposition against the Soviets and their Afghan supporters. A variety of communication channels were used to deliver such messages, but the most effective ones, especially in rural areas, were poems and music. Johnson reports an example of a widely circulated Pashto poem intended to depict Babrak Karmal (the Afghan politician who was installed as president of Afghanistan by the Soviets when they invaded in 1979) as a traitor:

> O Babrak! Son of Lenin
> You do not care for the religion and the faith
> You may face your doom and
> May you receive a calamity, o! son of a traitor.
> O! son of Lenin.
> (In Johnson 2007: 320)

The Taliban have built on this narrative tradition to both communicate and intimidate, posting letters or leaflets during the night. For example:

> We inform those people of Maroof district that serve Americans day and night [...] those who dishonor sincere Muslims of the country that American guards will not always be there and we can catch you any time. We know the name and place of every person; learn a lesson from those who were loyal to Russians; (if God wills) soon you will come under the knife or bullet (In Johnson 2007: 327).

Amir considered night letters not simply as admonitions:

> They were instructions to learn the Taliban's way. Sometimes people do not see what's best for them. They need to see a better way. You have to tell them "this is the way to gain your freedom from invaders". Again and again you have to repeat: "with God's help, Afghans will rule their land"[16].

Amidst the different forces that strengthened the movement, some joined the Taliban regardless of their political or religious beliefs. The Taliban's possession of weapons and money cannot be underestimated. In fact, Amir himself said,

> There are no examples of political parties or revolutionary movements in the world that have been able to remain perfectly coherent with their mission and their rules. Some Taliban commanders failed in their duty to be an example for other Afghans. Some Taliban failed in implementing the will of God, especially those who were motivated by money and material benefits[17].

"Our humanity"

In 2001, when the US-led coalition launched the Operation Enduring Freedom, Amir thought that "the Taliban's struggle for the freedom of Afghanistan would need to intensify as never before"[18]. Amir's idea resonates with Abdul Salam Zaeef's thoughts made explicit in a poem written while he was imprisoned in Guantanamo and published in his book, *My Life with the Taliban*:

> This "freedom" put a proud people in chains
> And turned free men into slaves
> "Independence" made us weak
> And slaughtered us
> In the name of kindness
> This is democracy by the whip
> And the fear of chains
> With a whirlwind at its core.
> (Zaeef 2010: vii)

Coalition forces acted in the name of freedom, too. By seeking the end of the Taliban's regime, they declared their intention to both free Afghan women from repression and obscurantism and free the world from terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood noted that the "twin figures of the Islamic fundamentalist and his female victim helped consolidate and popularize the view that such hardship and sacrifice [i.e., the war] were for Afghanistan's own good" (Hirschkind, Mahmood 2002: 341).

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16. Conversation with Amir, November 2014.
17. Conversation with Amir, November 2014.
18. Conversation with Amir, October 2007.

I have elsewhere (De Lauri 2012) focused on the implications, contradictions, and hidden intentions of the US-led military and humanitarian intervention in Afghanistan. The legitimacy of humanitarian wars is a highly debated and deeply ambivalent issue. Since the mid-90s of the 20th century, the "humanization of sovereignty has shifted the focus from rights of states to the needs of humans" and has therefore "promoted a significant evolution of international law in the direction of a legal obligation of the Security Council to take humanitarian action" (Peters 2009: 540). This process has opened the way for humanitarian interventions worldwide. Beyond their immediate impact, humanitarian wars are a primary means of globally affirming a specific model of humanity, one that is built according to the cultural, moral, and economic standards of Western democracies (De Lauri 2016). From such a perspective, governing unstable, corrupt, and underdeveloped countries is something needed by humanity at large. This process is realized worldwide via a politics of intervention and change for which humanitarianism creates the conditions of salvation and liberation while at the same time consolidating certain models of consumption, political organization, resource exploitation and land use, social relations, and the like, as inscribed in the logic of international interventions. In post-2001 Afghanistan, this took the form of military operations, reconstruction efforts, the promotion of the rule of law and democracy, and women's emancipation (De Lauri 2012, 2016). The language adopted in the post-2001 international conferences on Afghanistan held in Bonn, Tokyo, and London, as well as in the humanitarian campaigns and Western media, combined the idea of reconstruction with that of a new era, a new *humane* project for Afghans. This is a tendency similar to what Partha Chatterjee (1989) observed in the civilizing project of the colonial regimes, and which is today intrinsic to modernization and democratization programs. Humanitarian military interventions – which always enable gendered (Duncanson 2013), ideological, and utopian performances connecting the local level to larger scenarios – reproduce an unresolved tension between notions of opportunity, liberation, responsibility, protection, and military necessity. Michael Schmitt (2010) has argued that the latter is the most misunderstood principle in international humanitarian law, noting that it has historically developed a central, albeit fragile, relationship with the concept of humanity.

War in the name of freedom has been a dominant feature of human history. The Second World War pushed the fight for freedom beyond the limits of territorial domain and, by scaling up, concretely redefined freedom as a global achievement for humanity against all forms of tyranny. Contemporary humanitarian wars have built on this vision such that the soldiers who participate in broad humanitarian interventions have become crucial figures

in global salvific forces. In Western media, for instance, the rise of the Taliban has been described not merely as a problem for Afghanistan but as a threat to the entire world. In May 2001, following the Taliban's ban on opium cultivation (arguably motivated by surplus accumulation and the need to keep the price high rather than by an antidrug campaign), Washington initiated an intense dialogue with the Taliban government as part of the US war on drugs. A few months later, after 9/11, the Taliban – and their support of Al Qaeda – became the main target of a larger war on terror. In this framework, the US-led military coalition and the Taliban did not simply materialize the implications of global geopolitics in the form of warfare but, more broadly, confronted different visions of the world and different ideas of freedom and humanity.

The utopian freedom embodied by military and humanitarian actors in post-2001 Afghanistan combined values of emancipation and liberation with war and chastisement (De Lauri 2019). In *Human, All Too Human*, Friedrich Nietzsche (1996) maintained that the "root idea of humanity" is that in the world of freedom, humans are not free. The military Operation Enduring Freedom – initially named Operation Infinite Justice – defined a clear configuration of the human condition: in the areas of the world (still) reluctant to embrace (neoliberal) freedom, humans (especially women) must be freed (by means of war and humanitarian interventions). The assumption is that freedom is the ultimate achievement of an emancipation process culturally understandable within the political framework of Western democratic ideals. This form of freedom is therefore one needed by humanity at large: in the world of freedom, everybody must be free. Such freedom recalls Nietzsche's notion of a *second actual world*, one that exists beyond the given reality in the ideological intentions of global political players.

Reflecting on his time serving in Afghanistan, Mario said in one of our interviews in Rome in 2016,

> The objective of the ISAF[19] mission in Afghanistan [...] was to help Afghans to rebuild their country, to give hope to the Afghan population. In fact, not only to the Afghan population. Everybody was concerned about the Taliban. And yes, we know that in all military interventions civilians also die. But what happens if we don't stop regimes like the Taliban? What happens if we don't fight terrorism? These are questions not only for Italians or Afghans, but for everybody. We cannot imagine a world where in some places regimes like the Taliban can impose their religious violence without any obstacle[20].

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19. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan was a NATO-led security mission established by the United Nations Security Council in December 2001 by Resolution 1386, concluded in 2014.
20. Interview with Mario, Rome, June 2016.

Mario's opinion paralleled one held by Pietro, an Italian lieutenant colonel who served in Lebanon and Iraq for a total of three years. He made the significant observation that

> Humanitarian wars have produced a radically different way of understanding the role of soldiers. Their moral duty is no longer fostered by the idea of expanding empires. Nowadays, soldiers feel a moral duty towards humanity at large. Military interventions in the Middle East and Africa are part of a system of cooperation and governance that aims to create a more connected and safer environment, not only where instability dominates but also here in Europe. [...] Soldiers are at the frontline in the global struggle to establish the rule of law to the detriment of the law of the jungle[21].

The father of two sons (one of them born while he was on mission abroad), Mario was conscripted to the army at the age of eighteen and soon decided to continue a military career. Before going to Afghanistan, Mario did not know much about the country, nor did he have the opportunity to get to know it properly while he was there. The dominant image he had of Afghanistan was shaped by humanitarian campaigns:

> Honestly, it doesn't help to find yourself in a place you do not really know. You feel like an alien. Actually, you see people there like aliens, at least at the beginning. I've always been in the military. That's my job. That's who I am, and that's why I was in Afghanistan. [...] To believe in a military intervention such as that in Afghanistan means to believe in the world we want to build. For example, what kind of life would you like to have? All the humanitarian organizations in Afghanistan serve this important need and the military protects them. NGOs save lives, build hospitals, etc., and they bring good values. I'm proud especially when I see young guys moving in the most hazardous places to do this important job. This is important for us all, isn't it[22]?

In Mario's perspective, the struggle for a safer and better future is situated in the humanitarian arena as a space of transformation, or more specifically, of intervention. Such intervention is both benevolent and violent, as Mario himself implied when he told me, "To provide aid without military means would be ideal, but it's not possible in a place like Afghanistan"[23]. Humanitarian wars, as much as the terror produced by states, armed groups, and fundamentalists, illustrate a precise feature of modern history: the capacity to remake the world according to specific ideologies and interests, embodying the attitude of the "modern human" to take charge of its own destiny (Gray 2003). For those who believe in the higher scope of humanitarian

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21. Interview with Pietro, Rome, June 2016.
22. Interview with Mario, Rome, June 2016.
23. Interview with Mario, Rome, June 2016.

wars, to bomb in the name of humanity (White 2000) is not perceived as contradictory to the extent that bombing is a means to realize a broader social project. Indeed, war in itself is a "social project among many competing social projects" (Richards 2005: 3). In *Invoking Humanity* (2002), Danilo Zolo suggests that war is always the victory of invisible powers (related to underlying economic and political interests) – and humanitarian wars conducted in the name of humanity are no exception.

Yet humanitarian soldiers do not simply fight in the name of humanity. Rather, they are agents of a distinctive configuration of "humanity" (De Lauri 2019), a configuration that is neither the sum of nations nor anything given (Rees 2009) but, instead, one that represents an attempt to frame collective existence in specific ways and to define a path toward the future. Humanitarianism, embodied in its agents (NGOs, practitioners, soldiers), provides a point of entry onto the stage of universal humanity. Ideals of progress, emancipation, democracy, and freedom constitute the extended realm of humanitarianism, beyond its immediate imperative to save lives. Humanitarian soldiers are an integral part of this broad system of practices and values that define the trajectory of a universal humanity. As Mario told me,

> Here we are talking about our humanity, because we have to understand that, after all, we all have the same destiny. That's why you can't simply say, "well, let the Taliban do what they want in their country". This is not possible. [...] Do you remember Giuseppe Ungaretti's poem "Soldati" [Soldiers]? We all learned it at school as kids: *Si sta come d'autunno sugli alberi le foglie* [We are as in autumn on branches the leaves]. I often think of it as a soldier myself now. In places like Afghanistan, they are all like leaves on trees. So many attacks, bombing. We don't want the rest of the world being like that[24].

Mario's concerns, as well as those of Pietro, are illustrative of today's changing characterization of military ethos and duty (De Lauri 2019) and are pertinent to the following questions:

> If states and armies have an obligation to use their military forces for the sake of humanity, what of the soldier who might die in the line of the duty? Is there the same duty to risk one's life and die for humanity that there is, generally, to risk one's life for the state? (Gross 2008: 213).

To produce humanity and to die for it – and, of course, to kill for it – seem to be interlinked attitudes in the perspective of the humanitarian soldier.

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24. Interview with Mario, Rome, June 2016.

Conclusion

One of Mario's poems, written while on service in Afghanistan[25], is entitled "Us":

> I have seen him many times
> I can see him now
> So much similar to me
> And so much different
> Two roads of one path
> I fight against him
> I fight for him.

Several times during our conversations, Mario emphasized that participating in humanitarian interventions, such as the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, produces divided sentiments and, to some extent, a divided self that echoes broader forces of separation among peoples while simultaneously enabling mechanisms of recognition (of the "other"). Ignited by instances of identification, sacrifice, and liberation, and lying at the intersection of military struggles and projects of humanity, separation and recognition are critical aspects of conflict. A 2007 poem included in the collection *Poetry of the Taliban* is entitled "On the Islands of Separation":

> On the islands of separation,
> The watchman forgot the caravan.
> In the storm of ignorance,
> I forgot pain and remedy.
> I am not aware of the situation anymore,
> For tomorrow I think about today and yesterday.
> Each chapter of my life
> Is an exhibition of grief.
> I hear someone moaning;
> More and more I am not aware of what is happening.
> I possess eyes and hands;
> But, seeing and doing is not advised.
> Why? These are no small feelings;
> I am not aware of good and evil
> Because there I am choking on a sweet medicine.
> I am asleep but my eyes open;
> This is the mystery of such magic.
> In abatement and stiffness, believe me!
> One life is angry with the other.
> For the happiness of strangers,
> I have sacrificed my life and property.

25. Translated from Italian to English by me and published here with his authorization.

And so at last, this is my situation,
Where the day of judgment is presented like a feast day.
Each chapter of my life
Is an exhibition of grief.
What should I do with the hands and feet given to me?
I cannot find life.
I am happy to be dumb rather than talkative,
It means I can't observe dissimilation.
Such knowledge should be drenched in a flood;
I possess a mouth and I can't speak.
I have suffered and been set on fire many times;
My day and my night is surprised by attacks in the night.
Each chapter of my life
Is an exhibition of grief.

(In Strick van Linschoten, Kuehn 2012: 208-210)

Both violence and hierarchy are central to the political and moral projects of humanity (Çubukçu 2017). All forms of mass political violence, such as war and terrorism, destroy both the physical world and the "abstracted humanity" (Devji 2009) they target. However, destruction is never the final goal of war, which is, rather, to forge new categories of people and life, new visions of the world, that is, to forge another abstracted humanity. As key agents of this attitude of producing humanity through war, the Taliban and the humanitarian soldier embody the complex, ambivalent, and anguishing dynamics such a process involves. The forms of humanity that these figures of contemporaneity manifest constantly move toward and away from each other, eventually appearing as what Mario's poem described as two roads of the same path.

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