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Romain Malejacq. *Warlord Survival: The Delusion of State Building in Afghanistan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9781501746420 (hardcover, \$39.95).

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There is a persistent paradox in the literature (and policy-related discourse) on warlordism that spills over into the larger scholarship on political violence and state formation: while some observers regard warlords as insurmountable spoilers, too strong and sinister to be tamed, others characterize them as paper tigers that could be easily dismissed with the right kind of political will.¹ Romain Malejacq has broken through this paradox and unraveled it once and for all, a task that required an exceptional combination of theoretical creativity and empirical labor. Based on rich and difficult qualitative field research conducted across northern and western Afghanistan, *Warlord Survival: The Delusion of State Building in Afghanistan* examines the trajectories of the country's most formidable (and notorious) strongmen to ask the question "How do warlords survive and even thrive in contexts that are explicitly set up to undermine them?"

In pursuing his answer, Malejacq does the fundamental work of reconceiving of power and control, from canonical notions of territoriality and material capacity to those of influence (*nafuz* in Persian), to reveal the true political genius of the warlord. Inspired by concepts from Pierre Bourdieu (symbolic power) and James C. Scott (prestige), Malejacq demonstrates the ways in which symbols, perceptions, and status produce a kind of political alchemy that is hard to pin down but is undeniable just the same.² His warlords weave between apparent strength and weakness – menacing and marginal in turns – so that the very acts of appearing, disappearing, and reappearing become their strategy of politics and even rule.

But Malejacq's book is only in part about warlordism; *Warlord Survival* employs warlordism as a means of studying (and critiquing) foreign-led state-building as a political project. It obscures and then dissolves the often artificial disciplinary line between international relations and comparative politics by focusing on an actor that transcends this boundary. This

¹ For those interested in exploring earlier literature on warlordism, see, for examples, Lucian Pye, *Warlord Politics: Conflict and Coalition in the Modernization of Republican China* (New York: Praeger, 1971); Terrence Lyons and Ahmed I. Samatar, *Somalia: State Collapse, Multilateral Intervention, and Strategies for Political Reconstruction* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1995); William Reno, *Warlords Politics and African States* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998); Paul Jackson, "Warlords as Alternative Forms of Governance," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 14:2 (Summer 2003); Kimberly Marten, "Warlordism in Comparative Perspective," *International Security* 31:3 (Winter 2006/07): 41-73. On the numerous, competing characterizations of warlords and warlordism in Afghanistan, see Keith Stanski, "So These Folks are Aggressive': An Orientalist Reading of 'Afghan Warlords,'" *Security Dialogue* 40:1 (2009): 73-94.

² In this sense, Malejacq's work is reminiscent of other scholarship that reconsiders governing authority, whether authoritarian or insurgent, as a function of symbols, discourse, and ideas. See, for examples, Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civil Life During War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

is especially necessary intellectual work in cases of foreign intervention, because this boundary, and the sovereignty it connotes, is especially supple. Fledgling “post-conflict” regimes, like the Karzai government in Afghanistan, face an existential challenge. These governments are, from the start, at the mercy of international donors and the *rentier* dynamics they introduce and, so, perpetually unsure as to whom they owe fealty – their citizens or their funders.

Warlords have greater agility than the regimes in their midst. They can be barriers to or participants in domestic state-building while engaging in their own forms of foreign relations. In post-2001 Afghanistan, they appeased the United Nations with the promise of poppy bans while catering to a neighboring country’s sectarian or ethnopolitical agendas.³ Warlords have their own international communities much as they have domestic ones. As Malejacq notes: “The warlords’ ability to mediate between different levels of politics is key to their authority” (60).

The forms of arbitrage they perform⁴ can be read as conniving, corrupt, and destabilizing, but the dynamism of warlordism matches the schizophrenic approach of the so-called international community, which remains a haphazard collection of incoherent organizations and agendas. The international approach is actually entirely incompatible with the kind of Weberian rational predictability it claims to advance as a goal. In this sense, warlord shape-shifting functions as a kind of mirror-image of Western inconsistency. And, so, the success and resilience of warlords can be explained as much by international coherence as by the vagaries of local Afghan politics. After all, the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan partnered with warlord-commanders to defeat the Taliban after the September 11th attacks; it then supported efforts to demobilize them only to remobilize them a few years later in the service of countering extremism.

Because, much like the warlords he studies, Malejacq’s book moves between the international and domestic levels, his analysis uncovers yet another surprising feature of warlordism that helps us understand the survivability of this class of political actors. Even as they embrace the dynamism that comes with violent conflict and foreign intervention, they also serve as stabilizing anchors for the communities in their midst. Strongmen command a kind of authority during war that may be less salient during peacetime but can prove invaluable for holding communities together and bringing them into dialogue with the outside world.⁵ It is impossible to finish this book and not confront the possibility that a technocratic pedigree and sensibility may be inadequate, orthogonal, or even at odds with what is required for those who rule during war.

If we take Malejacq’s portrait of these Afghan leaders seriously, then donors, activists, and scholars need to rethink a number of assumptions as to what “good” governance looks like in a site of relentless insecurity, struggle, and suffering. Informal institutions and norms shape the evolution of politics in many parts of the world. And, while exciting new work has been advancing on the study of organizational dynamics in the world of non-state armed actors,⁶ less serious research has offered a critical examination of personality, persona, and the particularities of both. Malejacq’s mechanisms of power projection and conversion afford a kind of conceptual flexibility that accommodates material and non-material forms of power, formal and informal institutions, and demonstrates how they all can interact with one

³ For further reading on the political economy of Afghan warlordism and state-building, see David Mansfield, *A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors and the State in Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Co, 2009).

⁴ Ariel I. Ahram and Charles King, “The Warlord as Arbitrageur,” *Theory and Society* 41:2 (2012): 169-186.

⁵ On the distinct requirements of wartime governance, see Dipali Mukhopadhyay and Kimberly Howe, *Good Rebel Governors: Revolutionary Politics and Western Intervention in Syria* (New York: Cambridge University Press: forthcoming).

⁶ See, for examples, Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Sarah Parkinson, “Organizing Rebellion: Rethinking High-Risk Mobilization and Social Networks in War,” *American Political Science Review* 107:3 (August 2013): 418-432.

another in a single individual's political life. Through that individual, we can, then, zoom back out to achieve a fuller understanding of the more macro drivers of politics, from ethnicity to geopolitical clientelism.

Malejacq's case study approach, which paints complex but accessible portraits of each individual and the social world around him, reflects the very best of inter-disciplinary qualitative fieldwork. He embraces what Erica Simmons and Nicholas Rush Smith call an "ethnographic sensibility," with cases that are richly graphic and take the reader into the heart of contemporary Afghan political life.⁷ Malejacq weaves seamlessly between his finely detailed empirical data and his larger theoretical narrative, always humble about what that data can tell us even as he convinces us that he has unlocked something new that we don't want to miss. He deploys an economy of language and detail, never drowning us in unnecessary detail but also does the careful work of triangulation, giving us the confidence that we can trust his perspective. His consideration of imagery and the ways in which particular images carry is reminiscent of Lara Deeb's work on piety and the ubiquity of particular imagery in the neighborhoods of Beirut controlled by Hezbollah.⁸ His introduction of stories, like that of the "special man" and his king, told to him by a Herati man (86-87), invoke the kind of metaphorical, analogical thinking that reflect how our interlocutors often build our theories for us. For Malejacq, they are not sources of data but rather co-producers of knowledge.⁹

At the heart of Malejacq's book is the notion of authority-through-adaptation, a much-needed innovation for students who are concerned with political violence and its relationship to governance and state-building. But, while adaptation is an extremely useful concept, it is also a capacious one, whose bounds are sometimes hard to conceive. Are warlords truly cats with nine lives, able to reincarnate themselves no matter what, or are there certain fates that amount to a lethal political blow? And what of those strongmen who seem to have fully integrated themselves into the apparatus of the state? Are they no longer warlords? Has the state triumphed, or does the tussle persist? These are questions the reader ponders after setting down *Warlord Survival*. One can hope and expect that she will carry and adapt them to fruitful ends in subsequent research on the many non-state and quasi-state armed actors that make their presences felt on the world stage today.

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⁷ Erica Simmons and Nicholas Rush Smith, "Comparisons with an Ethnographic Sensibility: Studies of Protest and Vigilantism," in Simmons and Smith, eds., *Rethinking Comparison: Innovative Methods for Qualitative Political Inquiry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

⁸ Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁹ On the possibilities for more collaborative forms of research in sites of violent conflict, see Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay, "The 'Tribal Politics' of Field Research: A Reflection on Power and Partiality in 21st Century Warzones," *Perspectives on Politics* 14:4 (2016): 1011-1028.