



Book Review

The Quiet Violence of Empire: How USAID Waged Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan

Attewell, W. (2023). University of Minnesota Press. ISBN 9781517907891 (cloth) US\$108.00; ISBN 9781517907907 (paper; e-book) US\$27.00. 326 pages.

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The Quiet Violence of Empire examines how the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has waged counterinsurgency in Afghanistan from the 1960s to the present. The author draws from critical geographies of development and infrastructure as well as critical race theory to examine the soft power underpinning the more overt or ostentatious forms of violence that accompany war and occupation. One of Attewell's main arguments is that the USAID has been fundamental to the US state and its attempts to extend its empire in the 20th and 21st centuries. Empire building requires what the author (p. 8) calls "transnational infrastructures of development intervention" and these were formed in the post World War II period. In the introduction, Attewell argues that while development is often seen as a good thing or has the connotation of helping and service, from a critical geographer's point of view development is seen as infrastructure and thus an object of security. The extension of development and infrastructure leads to securitization of spaces, of material, of people, and integration with capitalism. Development is often advanced internationally alongside discourses of multiculturalism, human rights or citizenship. However, underneath this, in terms of the effects, the author argues that the securitization of spaces through infrastructure development leads to an extension of power that underpins empire.

In Chapter 1, Attewell uses archival documents to show that USAID has long used Helmand Valley as a laboratory for its development practices with links to empire building. Although many commentators point out Afghanistan has never been conquered or fully colonized, whether it be British or Russian

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attempts, the United States made serious incursions in this regard using this soft power or a development-based approach. The entrenchment and reproduction of transnational infrastructures for the proliferation of capital in Afghanistan (p. 28) has been a major aspect of this and the USAID complex (p. 30) is the key agency or cluster of agencies that undertake the extension of empire. USAID had been active with Afghans since the 1960s. The focus was the Helmand Valley and building infrastructure in that region as a project of development. This included large-scale hydro-political projects. Not all Afghans appreciated these incursions in the space and the techno politics unfolding in the Helmand Valley. Several heavy engineering projects (p. 63) were planned for the rural development of Afghanistan, and Attewell argues that the Helmand Valley was repurposed into a laboratory of racial management where some populations had to be governed, surveilled and policed to prevent them from resisting these development projects (p. 65). As Attewell puts it, rifles often accompany bulldozers in these development projects. Another focus was agricultural production, creating a system of water transfers to enhance agricultural production and further develop that agricultural production, plugging it into global circuits of capital.

In Chapter 2, Attewell argues that development and infrastructure expansion introduces new logistics and rationales for governance. There was an imposition of western and US approaches to making space and wielding infrastructural power in the 1960s, and in the 1970s and 1980s the USAID launched a suite of counter-narcotics programs that explicitly tied the provision of further agricultural assistance to the immediate eradication of poppy fields (p. 92). In this way, the War on Drugs shaped the development and securitization of Afghanistan in the 1980s. The soft power or counter-insurgent nature of development requires various humanitarian rationales and projects to be ongoing, and the USAID did undertake some humanitarian efforts in rural Afghanistan at the same time as they were involved in the marketization of spaces throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan. By creating offices for development infrastructure loans and access to global markets, the US and its development agencies were trying to pacify large swaths of Afghan territory. Of course, there were more insidious forms of control happening. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was active in the same regions in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands (p. 119). There was police and military training, and there were units targeting opium production, all precursors to the US War on Terror. These practices show the extent to which the US was active in governing Afghans and Afghan spaces, and Attewell reveals the combination of soft power with overt state control and the role of the USAID in that.

In Chapter 3, Attewell argues that rapid development and rapid marketization are forms of violence and harm. Attewell shows that the operations of these US agencies were based on a counter-insurgent model, and that this counter-insurgent model borrowed from criminological theories of crime and disorder. The idea of broken windows policing theory is familiar to most criminologists and criminal justice scholars. The idea, created by Kelling

and Wilson (1982), suggests that police and social control agents should target all the little things to prevent them from turning into big problems. For example, in policing, this would refer to unhoused people, graffiti, litter, people who are loitering, etc. In the context of international development, when broken windows counterinsurgency is applied, it means regulating all kinds of conduct (e.g., the way people use public space, holy days) that do not fit into the new development model. Attewell argues that this is a form of social control, but also racial and cultural governance insofar as this attempt at counterinsurgency leads to more racialized logics of imperial and domestic order management (p. 138). This control paints any communal forms of living as proto-communist. In other words, this large-scale development apparatus also involves managing the day-to-day aspects of life in Afghanistan. The approach to development in Afghanistan did involve the “US empire-state’s counter narcotics playbook” (p. 142), as well as police training, military training, and other forms of social control. This all shows how global infrastructures of war capitalism are integrated with other kinds of social control and governance (p. 142).

Attewell argues that in the 1990s and 2000 we start to see the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) working with local Afghan police to seize all kinds of materials related to opium production and poppy growing. DynCorp also was involved in sending teams to regulate opium-producing groups in several Afghan provinces. This DynCorp work in Afghanistan shows that the quiet violence of empire also relies on some private players or state-corporate symbiosis (O’Reilly, 2010). Attewell also points to agricultural companies and corporations that were involved in forcing farmers to rely on certain seeds and chemicals, again, revealing the private influences profiting from the building of empire.

In Chapter 4, Attewell brings an abolitionist sensibility to thinking about these dynamics and how some kinds of resistance could be undertaken to the consolidation of US imperialism and global capital in Afghanistan. The author points to the racial logics underpinning many of these governance processes, how public and private forms of social control intersect, and how more and more space is securitized through these attempts at extending western development schemes. Attewell then examines the rise of security intelligence focusing on the Taliban and arrives at the so-called War on Terror in Afghanistan in the 2000s, when overt state power and military violence becomes more integrated with the infrastructure and circuits of capital already in place across Afghanistan.

The author argues that these forms of development attempt to eliminate local diversity, replacing it all with western development schemes aimed at accumulating capital. Once again, the abolitionist sensibility comes across in the final pages of the book where the author cites Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s *Golden Gulag* (2007), which looks at prisons as motors of industry or as economic accumulation projects. The author draws inspiration from abolitionist works on prisons in the criminal justice system to suggest that just

as abolitionists call for the rejection of penal institutions and the whole network of practices that underpin them, so too should critical scholars and activists work to abolish the apparatus of power that supports the quiet violence of empire through agencies like the USAID.

The Quiet Violence of Empire ends with a coda. The book was written before the Taliban retook power and reformed government in Afghanistan after the United States military withdrew hastily. Attewell asks what a decolonial form of alternative development would look like (p. 237) and suggests that abolitionist thinking can help in this regard. The goal must be to reclaim this war infrastructure and repurpose it for the public good. *The Quiet Violence of Empire* reveals so much about US interests in Afghanistan and the longstanding practices of the US in Afghanistan. It provides a history of the present for understanding the War on Terror in Afghanistan, which as described in the book is really about protecting the infrastructure that the USAID had been building for decades. The occupation and war were about using hard power to protect what these agencies had been trying to build through the quiet violence of empire for years.

One omission is the work of Jeffrey Monaghan (2017), who has made some similar arguments about security, humanitarian aid, and development in other countries and places of occupation. Monaghan's argument about security aid is parallel to Atwell's work here on the quiet violence of empire. I also would have appreciated more detail on the kinds of surveillance that the state agencies and also the private agencies that the author mentions were undertaking to enforce their regimes of domestic management and control. Nonetheless, it is an impressive work drawing from all kinds of empirical sources. *The Quiet Violence of Empire* should appeal to critical geographers and critical criminal justice scholars. *The Quiet Violence of Empire* can help people make sense of the racist idiocy of the last two decades of the so-called War on Terror that we have been living through, and the economic and capitalist development agenda that underpins it. The final message about finding alternative forms of development that are consistent with abolition and social justice is also an important sentiment.

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