

1 'Take Your Help Away and Leave Us in Peace!'

The Anthropology of Geopolitics as Lived

This book is primarily an ethnographic study of actually existing forms of Eurasian connectivity. Across its pages, however, I also seek to offer insights into the ways in which I have collected the data on which the study is based. I intertwine this aspect of the book with a discussion of how my fieldwork activities have shaped the arguments in relation to which it is structured. It is not my intention to develop a distinct or novel methodology: fieldwork is always shaped by personal preferences, sensibilities and capacities rather than methodological conventions. There is, however, need for reflection on the types of fieldwork practices that can be deployed in order to achieve the accounts of 'thick transregionalism' in geopolitically complex contexts that theoretical interventions in the field of inter-Asian studies have advocated.¹ Such practices go beyond debates in the social sciences concerning the conduct of so-called multi-sited fieldwork. Literature on multi-sited fieldwork dwells on the question of how researchers can maintain ethnographic depth in the data they gather while working across a range of geographic locales;² alternatively, anthropologists argue that defining a specific field of research, rather than being preoccupied with the number of locales in which the research is conducted, is of central importance.³

I take the importance of ethnographic depth and conceptual definition for granted. My focus, rather, is on the specific challenges surrounding fieldwork in contexts characterised by the simultaneous presence of multiple geopolitical projects and among communities that work in and across such contexts. This chapter contributes to the book as a whole in two ways. Most generally, it demonstrates the degree to which the traders with whom I have worked have been routinely exposed to successive geopolitical shifts and tensions, and how such a distinctive level of exposure is intimately tied to their livelihoods, sensibilities and imaginations. I explore how I gauged the interaction between geopolitics and my interlocutors' thinking and sensibilities during the course of the fieldwork

¹ Ho 2017. ² Marcus 1995 and Candea 2007.

³ Cook, Laidlaw and Mair 2009 and Candea 2013.

and the way in which this led me to develop a convivial mode of ethnographic practice that may be of value for fieldworkers conducting research in comparable contexts shaped by multiple geopolitical projects and the tensions in which these result. Second, the chapter contributes to the arguments made in the book about the importance of mistrust to the traders' lives. It does so by way of an exploration of the significance of mistrust to my relationships with them during the course of the fieldwork. I build on work in anthropology that argues that mistrust can play a 'socially productive' role in sociality by encouraging groups and individuals to embark on particular courses of action.⁴ I also suggest that scholars stand to learn a great deal about the meaning, significance and value of mistrust to everyday life by engaging directly with the importance of this aspect of life to their own fieldwork activities. The aspect of fieldwork with which the chapter deals in particular, then, is my being an object of mistrust among the traders on whose activities I focused. As I suggest in what follows, this was an important if not all-defining dimension of fieldwork with the traders, with many of whom I was also able to establish warm, supportive and enduring relationships. In addition to exploring the implications of mistrust for shaping the nature of the data on which this book is based, I reflect on the ways in which the suspicious dispositions that my informants adopted towards me illuminate their broader experiences of living in a world at the centre of multiple geopolitical processes. As we shall see in Chapters 2 and 3, for the traders with whom I have worked, living geopolitics requires skill in navigating across and between multiple contexts. This chapter emphasises the importance of another equally important aspect of their everyday lives: the ability to withstand the stresses and tensions that life in the interstices of multiple geopolitical projects inevitably raises.

Geopolitics as Lived

The geopolitical contexts across which the traders operate are characterised by pervasive tensions and struggles; many traders experience these in recurring ways over the course of their lives. For all the traders from Afghanistan with whom I have interacted, the relationship between violence in their country and the legacy of nineteenth-century European imperial expansion, British colonialism, the Cold War, contemporary expressions of US imperialism and 'humanitarian intervention' and political tensions between the country's regional neighbours (notably Pakistan and India, and the Gulf states and Iran) are a vivid aspect of

⁴ Humphrey 2016: 9–10.

their daily thought and conversation. A great deal of everyday discussion among the traders concerns the nature of the geopolitical dynamics affecting Afghanistan, be these related, for example, to the question of whether 'the English' or the Americans have the upper hand in Afghanistan today, or assessments of Pakistan's interests in the country and Saudi Arabia's changing role. As well as actively presenting themselves through such conversations as accomplished theorists of international relations, some of the traders with whom I have interacted are themselves experienced and highly informed actors in formal forms of geopolitics. As I explore in greater detail in Chapter 2, men in their fifties and above conducting business between China and the former Soviet Union often entered the field of trade after serving as state officials in Afghanistan during the 1980s.

Interestingly, the nature of such traders' contemporary activities often reflects their past roles within the Afghan state. Afghanistan's Soviet-trained fighter pilots, for example, are renowned among the traders for the important role they play in long-distance transport companies. Transport companies (*shirkat-e transporti*) are an important aspect of the commercial landscapes of all the cities in which Afghan traders live and work. Such companies arrange for the transport of goods – by land and sea – from the cities in which they are procured to the contexts in which they are sold in wholesale markets. At the same time, transport companies must also be able to arrange the transfer of commodities through customs procedures – given the informal nature of much of the trade in which Afghan merchants are involved, doing so inevitably involves establishing relationships with officials in multiple contexts across Eurasia. In many such contexts, especially influential companies are run by men who formerly served as pilots in the Afghan air force. In the Chinese city of Yiwu, for example, a fighter pilot trained in Afghanistan during the 1980s arranges for the transport of goods to Odessa on Ukraine's Black Sea Coast, where a former colleague is known to have excellent ties with local officials and is able to pass goods through customs in a speedy and reliable manner. These former pilots also have one-time colleagues based in Afghanistan who oversee the import of Chinese goods to the country. The life histories of the pilots are vivid reminders of how traders have lived at the centre of geopolitical projects for several decades. One of the pilots, for example, told me how he had been trained by Soviet pilots in Afghanistan before flying for the mujahidin government that rose to power in the wake of the collapse of Kabul's Soviet-aligned regime in 1992. From 1996, the pilot flew for the Taliban government before being arrested and eventually released by American forces after they invaded Afghanistan and deposed the Taliban regime in 2001. The former pilots

regularly told me that they established themselves in the field of transport because they were left with no other options after losing their salaried positions in the 1990s and early 2000s. Afghan traders who use the services of such companies, however, remark that these men's excellence in trade-related transport reflects both their knowledge of international transport regulations and the close friendships they established with one another in the context of conflict – friendship that facilitates their ability to work together and trust one another over long distances.⁵

Afghanistan's historic status as an integrated part of an Asia-wide military labour market also impinges on the activities of the country's traders in the present day.⁶ A very limited number of traders who currently operate businesses across Eurasia have been actively involved in regional conflicts inflected with powerful geopolitical dynamics. I have heard reports, for example, that some of the traders now based in Russia and Ukraine were employed as mercenaries in the 1990s in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, a conflict involving fighters aligned to the Afghan Islamist leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.⁷ Other traders belong to communities in which individuals participated in such conflicts. During the course of a visit to Afghanistan, for example, a China-based trader was keen to introduce me to his uncle, who, he said, could teach me a great deal about 'the region' (*mantiqa*). During our meeting, my friend's uncle told me that during the 1980s he had fought alongside Iraqi-based Kurdish militia units fighting the Iranian regime.

The role Afghans have played in violent conflicts of a geopolitical nature remains a source of tension for migrants from the country in various settings today. The recruitment of ethnically Shi'i Hazara migrant labourers by Iran into the Fatemiyoun militia that has fought Sunni mujahidin groups in Syria has been widely documented in the international media.⁸ Reports also exist of the recruitment of young, rural Sunni Afghans by Saudi Arabia to fight Houthi Shi'i rebels in Yemen. Of a more ad hoc nature, Afghans in Ukraine have gained notoriety for achieving powerful positions in Ukraine's military and parliament; similarly, men of Afghan heritage living in Russia engaged in armed conflict against Ukraine.⁹ While most of the traders explored in this book have not been active in such conflicts, their status as foreign nationals or naturalised citizens in the places in which they work has been affected by the

⁵ Darryl Li argues that a range of factors – including migrant history, linguistic versatility and a career in civil aviation – led particular individuals to achieve the status of global jihadis in Afghanistan and then Bosnia in the 1980s and 1990s (Li 2020: 39–40).

⁶ Hopkins 2020. See also Nichols 2008. ⁷ Sands and Qazizai 2019: 341–46.

⁸ See Hamidi 2019. ⁹ Reuters 2016; BBC 2020.

former and ongoing military activities of Afghans in multiple conflicts – an issue I address in more detail in Chapter 3.

Geopolitical conflicts in the settings outside of Afghanistan in which they trade and work also directly affect the traders' commercial activities. As we shall see in Chapter 2, Afghan traders based in Ukraine made a significant proportion of their income by facilitating the informal movement of goods important to the country from China to Russia. The conflict between Ukraine and Russia made it harder for Ukrainian-based Afghan importers to transport Chinese commodities to Russia – the market that many relied upon to make substantial profits. The same conflict also required them to develop new routes for importing goods to regions of Ukraine – notably Crimea, which was annexed by Russia in February 2014 – that were especially affected by it. Some traders – including Gulzad, the trader I introduced earlier who had worked in China and Ukraine over the past three decades – were living in Odessa, Ukraine, in 2014. During the initial months of the conflict, they travelled back and forth between Odessa and Crimea in order to transport commodities to the newly annexed region. By 2016, Gulzad had managed to shift his residency to Crimea. Other Afghan traders capitalised on their location in southern towns of Russia – such as Pyatigorsk, the commercial significance of which expanded as the geography of trading routes to Crimea shifted as a result of the official closure of the Ukraine–Russia border.

Political tensions between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and the Gulf states also affect the activities of Afghan traders. As we shall see in Chapter 3, against the backdrop of tensions between the predominantly Sunni UAE and Shi'i Iran, suspicion in Dubai and Sharjah of Farsi-speaking Shi'i Afghans led to the closure of several businesses belonging to members of this community, as well as their being deported from the UAE. Since 2016, Chinese policy towards Muslims of Uyghur and Kazakh ethnicity living in Xinjiang has also affected the routes that Afghan traders use to travel to the country and the choices they make about where to locate their businesses and families. In 2018, several Afghan traders based in Yiwu had moved their businesses to the city from Urumqi (the administrative headquarters of Xinjiang autonomous region) because of intrusive forms of security practised by officials. Doing so meant that the contacts they had cultivated with officials in a range of areas of government in Urumqi – including the all-important offices that issue visas and residency permits – were rendered valueless. Similarly, the strict surveillance practices deployed by Chinese security officials in Xinjiang discouraged traders from travelling to the country by using a well-established air corridor that connected Kabul to Urumqi; instead,

traders travelled to eastern China using a circuitous route that involved long transit stays in either Dubai or Delhi. Knowledge about the ways in which Chinese policy in Xinjiang had affected Afghan traders there was shared by traders in the shops, markets and restaurants they collectively frequent. In October 2017, for example, I spent an afternoon with a China-based trader in his shop in western Kabul. During the course of the afternoon, the trader was visited by a further merchant from the city who made regular trips to China to procure commodities. The visitor told the shop-owner that he should avoid travelling to China via Urumqi, as all his phone data would inevitably be downloaded by Chinese security officials and the process would likely be so drawn out that he would miss his connecting flight to Yiwu. The men also shared with one another stories of Afghans married to Uyghur women in Xinjiang who had been forced to live apart from their wives and children by security officials.

Living in a world shaped by such conflicts and geopolitical tensions has, then, affected the traders' commercial activities as well as the routes along which they transport commodities and travel in multiple ways. In some contexts, it has also injected the nature of their relationships with officials in the states in which they live with political tensions and resulted in traders and migrants from Afghanistan more generally as being marked out for particular scrutiny by security services. As I now explore, life at the centre of various geopolitical projects has also affected the traders' sensibilities and imaginations in the countries in which they earn a livelihood, live and, often, raise their families.

Friends and Acquaintances across Eurasia

'This is my friend, Magnus, from the UK' is the way in which my friends in Afghanistan's trading worlds often introduce me to one another. It might be assumed that an introduction from a trusted friend offers a fail-safe route to further contacts and information. Among the communities with whom I have worked, however, the power of such introductions belies more complex dynamics. A frequent early riposte from the person to whom I had been introduced, for example, was to ask, 'Oh really, and how long have you known Mr Magnus for?' Nothing is taken for granted, and the need to test and investigate assertions of closeness and trust are widely accepted among the traders. Thus, the person to whom I am being introduced will often enquire whether I am someone's 'real friend' (*andival-e sahi*) or merely an 'acquaintance' (*ashna*). Indeed, my informants regularly evaluate the exact nature of such interpersonal relationships in terms of the length of time over which their partners have been known to one another. 'I've been friends with Magnus for over fifteen years' is likely

to elicit a response such as ‘Oh, so he is your real/true friend then’; a relationship that stretches back a mere five years is regarded as being far more suspect.

A mere five years? Anthropologists generally regard a long spell of fieldwork during which it is possible to establish multifaceted relationships with one’s research participants as falling somewhere between one year and eighteen months. Indeed, anthropology remains the only major discipline in the social sciences and humanities that requires doctoral students to engage in long-term fieldwork for a year or more. The inappropriateness of this model for studying the types of commercial networks on which this book focuses has struck me on many occasions over the past decade. It is widely recognised among anthropologists and students of related disciplines that traders are guarded about giving details of their activities to outsiders: they are fearful of commercial espionage and wary of information passing into the hands of their competitors. During my time in the Chinese city of Yiwu, traders I came to know would often ask me if I was working for a brand or company (Nike being the one most regularly referred to) in order to unearth their role in the sale of counterfeit goods.

The traders are especially sensitive to the effect of geopolitical processes on their activities and indeed their identities and ways of perceiving the world more generally. As Caroline Humphrey has argued, trade in general ‘operates between making a profit from the differences between the state of affairs in one place and that in another’, meaning that traders ‘by definition . . . infringe the boundaries between regionally defined units’.¹⁰ As I have explored elsewhere, this aspect of long-distance commerce also means that traders are open to the accusation of being spies and traitors.¹¹ It is hardly surprising, then, that traders regard figures who are engaged in practices similar to them with intense suspicion (travelling between nodes, establishing multiple relationships of trust and interacting with local authorities) yet in a manner that has no clear commercial motive. Fieldworkers studying such networks clearly fit this category of suspicious outsider, but so too do other actors from the region who visit the traders in the nodes in which they work: during the period over which I conducted fieldwork in Yiwu, my Afghan friends in the city were so suspicious of one Pakistani man who befriended them – on the grounds that he was interested in their lives and also spoke some Farsi – that they referred to him as ‘ISI’, the acronym of Pakistan’s intelligence agency (Inter-Services Intelligence). Over the course of my research, rumours have swirled about the cities and towns in which I have stayed about the

¹⁰ Humphrey 2002: 96–7. ¹¹ Marsden 2016.

'real' motivation for my interest in Afghanistan and its traders. What, I am often asked, is your 'real motive'? I have found it largely possible to address such suspicion about my research with people directly and on a face-to-face basis. It has, however, also restricted my ability to engage in practices – such as community surveys – that anthropologists regularly deploy in other settings. I decided during the course of my stay in Yiwu that to conduct a formal survey of Afghans in the city would result in further layers of suspicion among the traders towards me. Indeed, conducting a survey may also have excited the interest of Chinese state officials, even if all the research I conducted in China was approved by the municipal authorities and conducted on the basis of my holding the relevant visa. Influential Afghan traders in Yiwu enjoy close contacts with Chinese officials through their participation in organisations such as the city's 'dispute resolution' scheme, and I had been told that some traders provided such officials with information about suspicious foreigners in order to curry favour. There had been complex encounters during fieldwork too, including one in a shop in Odessa when a trader from Afghanistan told me that he knew I worked for MI6 and instructed me to stop visiting his shop. A central contention of this book is that mistrust permeates and pervades the lives and activities of traders as much as relationships of trust do. As a result, mistrust is also an enduring aspect of fieldwork: the strength, insistency and persistence of geopolitical tensions, anxieties and insecurities are palpable aspects of everyday life and one that permeates relationships of multiple types.

Anthropologists tend to assume that rumours about a fieldworker's dubious loyalties and what she or he intends to do with data gathered are issues of particular significance in the initial stages of fieldwork. The passage of time and the gradual emergence of closer ties, it is held, eventually result in the threshold between 'outsider' and 'insider' research being crossed and in higher levels of trust and a willingness on the part of research participants to better understand the purpose of fieldwork. I have come to recognise, however, that this assumption belies the more pervasive and complex role that mistrust plays in the lives, identities, social relationships and activities of the people with whom I worked.¹² As Venkatesh has argued, this simplified understanding of fieldwork also fails to assess how representations of 'the persona of the anthropologist' made by research participants reveal 'the interpretive properties and resources' available to them.¹³ Mistrust's pervasive place in the traders' lives is especially evident in the permanent state of vigilance they cultivate and in the manner in which they constantly test, gauge and evaluate the

¹² Verdery 2018. ¹³ Venkatesh 2002.

trustworthiness of those with whom they interact, both within and beyond the networks they form. As we shall see in what follows, for the traders, suspicion and mistrust are not aspects of interpersonal relationships that time corrects – they regard mistrust as a permanent and necessary aspect of sociality: one that is as much generative as it is corrosive of social relationships.

Take Your Help Away and Leave Us in Peace!

Traders in Yiwu regularly suggested to one another and myself that I was a spy for the British government. On the whole, traders made such accusations with considerable subtlety: sometimes using body language such as the wink of an eye; at other times by deploying irony and wit – ‘what will be the situation next year in Afghanistan’, I was often asked, ‘you should know because you English are in control of the situation’. For many of my informants in Yiwu, indeed, ‘the English’ (*inglis*) were regarded as the global masters of espionage – if the United States had paid for the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the English had masterminded it. ‘The English’ were held to exert unassailable influence over much of world politics, especially in Afghanistan, due to Britain’s long history of interference in the country’s politics and society. Attitudes such as these reveal the ways in which the historical experience of older and newer geopolitical tensions arising from the projects of empires and nation states interleave themselves in the networks, identities and imaginations of those who comprise them.

A colonial history of Anglo–Afghan relations that dates to the beginning of the nineteenth century shaped such attitudes towards my presence in Yiwu and elsewhere. Earlier scholarship by historians of Afghanistan emphasised the successive defeats of British military campaigns in the territories that make up modern-day Afghanistan and argued that the country had never fully been incorporated as a colony into British India.¹⁴ These studies depicted the British role in Afghanistan as limited to the creation of the region as a ‘buffer state’ between British India and the Russian Empire’s presence in Central Asia. Afghanistan’s purported status as a country that remained either free of European colonial influence or only ‘semi-colonial’ has for long been an important aspect of political discourse and official historiography in the country. The conception of Afghanistan as a country that resisted colonial interference informs official expressions of national identity in powerful and important ways. More recently, however, historians have brought attention to the direct

¹⁴ For a critical discussion of Afghanistan’s status as a ‘buffer state’, see Bayly 2014.

forms of influence that British India's colonial authorities did hold over various iterations of the Afghan polity from the early nineteenth century onwards.¹⁵ As in many other settings in Asia and Africa in the nineteenth century, British influence in Afghanistan, these accounts argue, was visible in official treaties, relationships cultivated with specific communities and officials and in specific policy areas, including the country's foreign affairs, diplomatic activities and the demarcation of its international boundaries. Scholars have also clearly demonstrated how far the models used to govern Afghanistan in the context of recent international interventions in the country build upon forms of 'colonial knowledge' that have their origins in nineteenth-century projects of European imperialism.¹⁶

Afghanistan played a pivotal role in the global Cold War, the immediate context of the conflict between mujahidin fighters and the pro-Soviet Afghan government in the 1980s.¹⁷ After the defeat of the Taliban in the wake of the 2001 US intervention, a new phase of international intervention unfolded. The framework for this period of intervention was one of liberal state-building: development, nation-building and women's rights were high on the agenda until 2014. After 2014, the withdrawal of a significant proportion of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops resulted in the presence of international forces in the country being defined in terms of 'global security'. From 2001 until the present day, international forces have enacted a range of forms of violence on Afghanistan's citizenry: night-raids on family compounds, deadly drone attacks and the deployment of the world's largest bomb being among the most visible.¹⁸ Scholarship on Afghanistan documents the nature and effects of contemporary military involvement in the country, the similarities and differences between present and past interventions, the value of analysing the 2001 occupation as an extension of the country's colonial past and the implications of the intervention for understanding global humanitarianism.¹⁹

Michael Herzfeld – a US-based anthropologist – has developed the concept of crypto-colonialism to analyse the paradoxical nature of the notion that particular societies were able to maintain their independence in the context of the global enforcement of international power structures. The notion of crypto-colonialism is also useful for thinking about Afghanistan because power-holders and the country's official discourse emphasise the degree to which its culture remains untainted by colonial influence.²⁰ Herzfeld deploys the concept of crypto-colonialism to

¹⁵ Bayly 2018, Fuoli 2017, Hopkins 2009. ¹⁶ Hanifi 2019. ¹⁷ Nunan 2016.

¹⁸ Bashir and Crews 2012. ¹⁹ Coburn 2016. ²⁰ Herzfeld 2002.

analyse the ways in which the denial of colonial influence in such contexts by political elites conceals the reality of direct foreign influence and control. Concealing overarching power structures in this manner obscures the role that national elites play in such processes, in terms, for example, of their role in 'civilising projects' and the active attempt of such projects to denigrate local forms of knowledge, identity and social organisation. Historical narratives – partly though not one-dimensionally originating in the Western academy – that depict Afghanistan as distinct from other countries in South Asia by dint of it having not undergone colonisation reinforce the country's depictions of the success of past leaders in stymieing colonial influence.

Traders were often direct in the criticisms they had of the effects that the latest expression of international intervention had had on their country. On making my way from Yiwu's wholesale market complex (Futian) to the hotel in which I was staying one hot summer afternoon, I came across a trader based in the city from eastern Afghanistan, Nasir. Nasir had lived in Russia for several years and held Russian and Afghan citizenship. He had moved to Yiwu from St Petersburg four years ago, and his main activity in the city was purchasing goods for export to Odessa in Ukraine. Nasir's younger brother had lived in Odessa for much of the past decade, and they ran a wholesale business in the city dealing in bathroom ware. In many of the contexts in which Afghans work, family members are distributed in this way across various geographical contexts to enable them to benefit from the circulation of commercial knowledge as well as shifting profit margins in multiple settings. Having discussed his circulatory mobility between Russia, Ukraine and Afghanistan, Nasir remarked to me that nothing would give him greater pleasure than to stop travelling around the world and to settle in Afghanistan. He concluded his discussion by remarking, 'you have destroyed the country, we do not know what you want from our country, and we Afghans are fed up with your help: you should take your help away and leave us in peace' (*buro qati komakha-at*).²¹

I emphasise in this book the role played by traders' experiences of the country's recent and more distant history in their everyday lives and self-understandings. The immediate context of the traders with whom I conducted fieldwork was defined, then, by a history of European imperialism and successive waves of international interventions, driven, at least in part, by competing projects of Eurasian geopolitical connectivity. Rather than merely being aspects of their societies' past that have displaced one another in a successive or sequential historical manner,

²¹ For a comparative discussion, see Morris 2016.

however, this history of geopolitical competition and conflict enfold itself within the identities and self-understandings of the traders who make up the networks. The traders think of themselves as sophisticated actors who understand the complex geopolitical processes affecting the worlds across which they live; some, if by no means all of the traders, seek to transfer the knowledge of geopolitics they have acquired in the domain of trade to that of politics by playing an active role in the government of Afghanistan.

Anthropology and Geopolitics

Anthropologists find it difficult to grapple in an ethnographic manner with the complex realm of geopolitics. Attempts to think about the role of geopolitics in anthropological fieldwork tend to revolve around the category of 'conspiracy theories'. As Mathijs Pelkmans and Rhys Machold have argued, this concept is problematic because it ascribes irrationality to particular theories of understanding the world rather than seeking to understand their interactions with the 'social and political worlds through which they travel'.²² Anthropologists tend to regard accusations of spying as an aspect of fieldwork that needs to be overcome and that the best way to do so is by building trust-based relationships. Alternatively, they treat such accusations as an inevitable occupational hazard in a discipline that requires individual researchers to cross multiple types of boundaries. Long-standing debates within and beyond anthropology about the discipline's relationship to power is also a central frame for the analysis of this aspect of fieldwork.²³

In the context of being repeatedly regaled during my time in the field with questions such as 'what is the future of Afghanistan?' or 'what plans do China and Russia have for Central Asia?', I have been tempted to enact a sensory shutdown and respectfully wait for specific evidence on trade and commerce to come my way. On reflection, however, it seems perplexing that a discipline perhaps best known for enriching our understanding of key scientific categories such as rationality, truth and evidence has developed arguments with ease and fluency in the field of religion but found engaging with that of geopolitics more difficult.²⁴ The focus on 'conspiracy theories' and anthropology's relationship to power is helpful

²² Pelkmans and Machold 2011: 68. Cf. Marcus 1998 and Sanders and West 2003. For a self-reflexive study of how one anthropologist followed up on accusations of her having been a spy, see Verdery 2018.

²³ For a classic intervention, see Asad 1973.

²⁴ For a notable exception, see Pelkmans and Machold 2011. For older and newer attempts by anthropologists to think about truth in relationship to the category of religion, see Pritchard 1937 and Holbraad 2009.

in many respects. Nevertheless, it fails to ask what encounters such as those described earlier reveal about the forms of agency and experience that people living in the midst of competing geopolitical projects themselves regard as being important.

The approach taken in this book, then, is to explore the ways in which particular communities, networks and groups experience and navigate life in the spaces betwixt and between competing geopolitical processes, powers, projects and dynamics. Doing so entails recognising – as others have – the skilful ways in which actors who operate in such contexts navigate between, and strategise in relation to, multiple geopolitical forces. But it also requires recognition of an aspect of acquiring such skills that has received less attention: the longer-term implications that cultivating the arts of navigational agency have for individuals and the mobile societies of which they are a part. While it is most straightforward to conceive of mistrust as the negative corollary of functional forms of trust-based relationships, my fieldwork experiences have brought my attention, instead, to the multifaceted significance of mistrust to traders' activities and lives. On the one hand, living in a wider context perceived as being characterised by mistrust can be profoundly distressing for traders whose livelihoods depend on making accurate assessments based on detailed knowledge of the trustworthiness of others.²⁵ On the other hand, however, they also recognise that it is important to maintain a healthy degree of mistrust – doing so allows them to survive and, potentially, flourish in the charged geopolitical contexts across which they lead their lives. Many of my own fieldwork experiences have themselves been characterised by interactions powerfully inflected with mistrust. As the earlier account of my fieldwork suggests, such interactions are multidimensional: they are distressing and stressful, but they have also acted as the grounds upon which I have established convivial relationships of friendships, humour and exchange. In this sense, just as the traders regard mistrust as being a fundamental substrate of all their social relationships and activities, so too has the experience of mistrust in fieldwork enriched rather than subtracted from my understanding of their modes of navigational agency, and, more broadly, of the approach I take towards conceptualising geopolitics as lived.

'You're an Agent, I'm an Agent – We're All Agents'!

I came to realise during the course of interactions such as the one in China described earlier that professing innocence in an earnest and sincere way

²⁵ Monsutti 2013.

in the face of accusations that I was a spy for the British government rarely if ever resulted in changes in the traders' attitudes towards me. Rather, using wit and irony to address the traders' thinking about my activities generated more interesting and engaging conversation. At one level, seeking to live up to the high standards of humour, intellectual exchange and irony that the traders' deploy in their conversations with one another helped me establish social relationships with them.²⁶ My informants would laugh uproariously, for example, when I would remark upon leaving a café in which we had spent an evening that I had to go to my hotel room urgently as it was time to submit another report to central command (*markaz*). One day, a group of traders asked me whether I drank alcohol – they enjoyed it when I remarked offhand that I did not, and they should know why: my work did not allow me to use intoxicating substances for reasons surrounding the sensitivity of what I knew. We also had many evenings of humorous banter during the course of which I joined the traders in their discussions about who 'the English' did and did not wish to serve in the Afghan government. Regardless of how effective an individual was or was not in their government position, it was their connections with the English that would determine their fate, they remarked. My friends would also remark to me that they were tired of living in China and told me that I could easily use my contacts in the United Kingdom to get them appointed to a ministerial position in a relevant part of Afghanistan's government. While such comments were made as jokes in the restaurants, trading offices and cafés in which we sat, they did reflect a seam of ambition among successful traders to trade in their accomplishments in the field of commerce for a political position. For example, a trader who learned Chinese in China after being sent to the country on a Chinese bursary arranged by the mujahidin government in the 1990s told me how he had activated his networks in Kabul after completing his MA with the aim of being appointed to a position in the country's embassy in Beijing. Only having not secured access to a suitable position did he embark on a new life by opening a trading company in Yiwu. The presence of such ambitions among the traders is important: it underscores the degree to which successful traders actively regard themselves as skilled and capable actors on the geopolitical stage, and it questions the relevance of thinking of them either as inevitably above or below formal expressions of geopolitics.

²⁶ Historical and anthropological scholarship on South and Central Asia has brought attention to the significant role played by lively debate inflected by the use of humour and wit in regional cultures. See Marsden 2005 and Subtelny 1984.

In other words, embracing the traders' categorisation of myself as a spy – albeit through the use of humour, wit and irony – enabled me to show respect to their historical understandings and experiences, and to do so in a way that privileged the form of sociality they deployed in their relations with one another. This reflects the dynamics of conducting fieldwork in environments that are best characterised as lying at the point at which multiple geopolitical projects intersect. My fieldwork practices constituted a way of addressing Afghanistan's position in relationship to international power structures yet in a manner that did not openly challenge the taken-for-granted nature of the country's historic independence from colonial influence. Joking and deploying irony to discuss the sensitive nature of Afghanistan's political relations with the wider world facilitated the discussion of aspects of the country's past and present that official discourses treat as unthinkable.

In light of such fieldwork experiences, conviviality is a helpful frame for analysing social dynamics in commercial nodes, but it is also worth thinking of it as a relevant type of behaviour for fieldworkers studying fraught geopolitical contexts. Conviviality has increasingly been used in a range of disciplines in the social sciences to refer to 'concrete practices of everyday interaction'.²⁷ In that such practices might enfold aspects that are good-natured and others that are more antagonistic, the concept is less clearly normative than other comparable ones, such as civility or cosmopolitanism.²⁸ The boundaries between humorous and antagonistic exchanges, indeed, dissolve in the course of convivial sociality. As a result, the outcomes of moments of convivial interaction – be they the deepening of social relationships or the eruption of interpersonal tensions – are contingent and difficult to predict. The contingent and pragmatic nature of conviviality offers a better lens into understanding actually existing forms of sociality found in fraught geopolitical landscapes than concepts invested with a powerful moral or even utopian component, such as those of civility or cosmopolitanism.²⁹ Convivial modes of sociality, moreover, are valued among people in Yiwu and the other trading nodes in which I have spent time. Learning and performing convivial modes of operating offers scholars of such contexts the possibility to engage in exchanges that more morally one-dimensional modes of interacting – such as sincerity and earnestness – preclude, not least because they reassert hierarchies of power, morality and knowledge. In contexts in which mistrust is a pervasive feature of daily life, modes of interacting that acknowledge

²⁷ Freitag 2020: 25.

²⁸ On the concept of conviviality in anthropology, see Marsden and Reeves 2018.

²⁹ On the concept of civility in anthropology, see Thiranagama, Kelly and Forment 2018.

and contest power differentials between researchers and research participants facilitate interaction and discussion.

One evening in Yiwu, for example, I passed by one of the simple beer shacks that I would occasionally frequent in the evenings if I wished to have a break from my normal routine of taking tea with traders in one of the city's many Muslim-oriented restaurants. On this occasion, instead of sitting outside on tables placed on the pavement, I went into the rather dimly lit backroom of the beer shack, where I discovered an Afghan trader known to me sitting with a partly consumed bottle of imported whisky. After checking there was nobody he knew outside, he beckoned me to join him. Aged in his late twenties and with a young family in Yiwu, he sighed 'Ah Mr Magnus, you've even found me here', before going on to tell me how many of his friends said 'all types of things about me', insinuating that I was an agent. But, he emphasised, he always told them that I was who I said I was – a professor – and that he had read pieces I had published on the BBC website in Persian that demonstrated this was indeed the case. There were, he said, others who had also vouched for me in his network of friends and business associates, especially a man in his forties whom I had met in one of the city's nightclubs popular with foreigners. Many more insisted, however, that Afghans should avoid me outright.

Checking once more that all was clear outside the beer shack, he poured another drink before telling me that I should not take the attitudes of Yiwu's Afghans towards me personally: they related to one another in this manner. Indeed, that was why he had come to drink his whisky alone – he was fed up spending time with his Afghan associates and wanted to decompress by himself from the combined stresses of trade and Afghan sociality. As the night wore on and the bottle of whisky gradually emptied, my friend – always alert as to the other people with whom we were sharing the room – explained to me that there were so many different points of view (*nakaat-e nazar*) in Afghan society that it had essentially become impossible for people to get along with one another. The country should be divided, he said, not by ethnicity or language but point of view: the piety-minded, the ethnicists and the politically ideological sections of society would all have their own spaces in which to live in Afghanistan if his model were to be adopted. There also needed to be a zone for us – literally, in Farsi, 'me and you' (*ma-u shoma*). If such a zone did not exist, he asked me, what would become of him? While he greatly enjoyed his life in China, the Chinese did not want people like him in their country forever, so he would have to move on to somewhere else in the future. Before leaving for home, the young trader (using a black marker pen) wrote his name and the Afghan name (Jawed) bestowed upon me by my informants in Afghanistan on the remaining

contents of a second bottle of whisky. I was welcome to have a glass whenever I swung by this store, he told me – I just needed to ask the Chinese shopkeeper (known by foreigners in the city as Josephina) to give me the bottle.

The night in the beer shack was revealing not simply for the insights it offered about the stresses and strains of life in Yiwu, traders' anxieties concerning their future in the city or the nature of their attachments to and imaginations of Afghanistan – all concerns that are explored in greater detail in later chapters of the book. Additionally, the evening also highlighted the extent to which mistrust pervaded traders' lives in terms of their experiences in and of China but also their interpersonal relationships with one another.

The following day, I decided to address the rumours circulating among Afghans in the city about my being a spy with another trader I had come to know during the course of my most recent spells of fieldwork in Yiwu. With experience of life in Russia and China and having once served as a government official in Afghanistan, I thought that this man in his late fifties would be an ideal person with whom to talk about my personal experiences. Not only was he experienced in dealing with sensitive issues, my turning to advice from a trader older than myself would be regarded as a demonstration of respect. Over the course of the night before meeting him, I carefully thought about what I would say. I would remark that I was surprised about such rumours continuing to swirl so vehemently in Yiwu even though I had made several visits to the city and had come to know traders well both there and elsewhere in the world. I prepared myself to say that I found such accusations bemusing: Was it not obvious that I would be a hopeless spy in this environment? Surely Afghans in Yiwu, I rehearsed, could recognise that if – for whatever reason – the UK government wished to investigate their activities in the city, they would recruit an Afghan with British citizenship rather than someone like myself, who stood out like a sore thumb in the city's Afghan social circles.

The following afternoon – as I often did – I ambled to the large and spacious café the man managed and also owned in partnership with an Arab merchant based in North Africa. After raising the issue of my being called a spy with him, however, I did not receive the answer of reassurance and support that I had – rather naively – expected. Nor did the trader express incredulity towards the attitudes of his fellow Afghans. Laughing, my friend remarked:

Not a few people say these things about you but a thousand! And they're right! But I say, yes, he's an agent, but let's speak to him – it's a great opportunity, we can

benefit from him, and he can benefit from us! The stupid thing about the other Afghans in this city is that they don't understand the value of agents – I do!

Slightly taken aback by my friend's response, I asserted that – regardless of what he thought – I was not an agent (*jasus*). Could he not see that there were individuals in Yiwu who were in a far better position to spy for the British on the city's Afghans than I was?

What do you mean you're not an agent? And anyway, what's wrong with being an agent? I'm an agent. There are lots of different types of agents – political agents, commercial agents, knowledge agents. Look! Every day I ask you about economic conditions in the UK, in Europe and other places; I ask you about taxes; I ask you about visas. What am I doing? I'm getting commercial knowledge from you which I then use and share with others. In your case, you are a knowledge agent: I tell you things about Afghans in Yiwu, and you will take it back and write it down and it will be used. It will be used by someone, otherwise why bother? There is nothing wrong with that! We're all agents – the problem with my compatriots is that they do not understand the value of being an agent and think that the only type of agent that exists is the political agent. But political agents are just one type of agent. Do you get my point?

As our conversation about the identification of 'agents' and their role in Yiwu continued, a further man joined us at the table at which we were sitting: a Pashto-speaking trader in his mid-fifties who was involved in commercial activities in Pakistan and Afghanistan. We had been introduced to one another in the same café some nights previously, and he was also keen to contribute to our ongoing conversation. He remarked that my friend was right: there are many different types of agent, and in Yiwu 'everybody is an agent' – it was on this assumption that all social relationships in the city were cultivated and maintained. It was impossible to know what type of agent people were or for whom they were working. Yet everybody in the city was conveying knowledge for one or another reason to one or another party: traders in Yiwu were reticent about dealing with one another for justifiable reasons, he remarked, but the accusation of spying in the city was nothing to be concerned about. Once again, these men's conceptions of themselves and the skills they recognise are required of them to work in a commercial node such as Yiwu underscore the ways in which living in a world of fraught geopolitics penetrates their sensibilities and self-understandings. As importantly, the traders do not regard themselves as being out of their depth or the beneficiary of one or other geopolitical power. Instead, they emphasise their ability to play the game as well if not with a greater degree of sophistication than more formally positioned geopolitical actors.

Convivial evenings such as these – in which humour and deadly seriousness, *bonhomie* and antagonism, openness and suspicion and trust

and mistrust are combined in creative and sometimes flamboyant ways – characterised much of my fieldwork experience in Yiwu and the other locations I have visited while conducting research for this book. My interactions with the traders underscore the role played by mistrust not only in the preservation of commercial secrets; it is also of critical significance to the building of social relationships with one another, as well as with non-Afghans. Societies in which the assumption of mistrust is all-pervasive reflect a wider attitude that regards the ability to read other people's minds and predict future courses of action as being impossible and indeed immoral.³⁰ As I have already noted, the traders' attitudes towards trust are multidimensional. They emphasise the significance of enduring ties of trust established in the context of social relationships to their activities, yet they also regularly remark that it is impossible to establish full relationships of trust – in the sense of being able to predict future courses of behaviour – because 'humans are always able to change their minds'.³¹ Afghan traders agree, then, that it is impossible to read other people's minds. In this sense, mistrust is not merely corrosive of human relationships but, rather, can establish the basis for future acts of forgiveness. In Humphrey's formulation, mistrust can be 'socially productive' in a 'non-normative sense': it enables 'something else' to happen, be that 'the emergence of mediators, processes of testing the untrusted other, or protests that may become political'.³² In this instance, the trader emphasises that mistrust of others need not foreclose the possibility of cultivating and sustaining social relationships and the forms of knowledge exchange in which these are implicated. Rather, a healthy degree of mistrust helps ensure that a relationship entails positive implications for both of its partners. Indeed, not refusing their categorisation of my being a specific type of agent – 'a knowledge agent' – helped to address the concerns of Afghans who were sceptical that scholarly interest in their activities alone would result in my spending as much time in the places in which I worked as I did. Interestingly, moreover, the trader also demonstrated to me his powers of analysis, insight and perception: he suggested that he was better able to understand my situation and activity than I was. Evident in the encounter, therefore, is the way in which traders seek to convey and transmit to one another and those with whom they interact the importance not simply of being sceptical of others but also of the nature of their own thinking and activities.

³⁰ See Carey 2017.

³¹ For a detailed consideration of trust's role in Afghan trading networks, see Marsden 2016.

³² Humphrey 2016.

You Cannot Just Stop Your Thoughts and Feelings

The responses of my informants to my presence in Yiwu are important not only because of the insights they offer into the type of fieldwork sensibilities helpful in conducting research in geopolitical sensitive contexts. They also offer important perspectives into the types of worlds and environments inhabited by the traders. These worlds have arisen over the course of many years at the heart of geopolitical struggles, tensions and boundaries – struggles that have and continue to be characterised by violence, military conflict and political and social ruptures. Trading networks that have arisen and proved durable in such contexts have done so because they are able to negotiate between multiple geopolitical projects. It is important, however, not to lose sight of the ways in which life at the interfaces of geopolitical projects inflects people's everyday lives, sentiments and modes of interpreting the world in a way that reminds us that such actors are not merely savvy and slippery characters able to exploit complex situations instrumentally and for their own benefit. This is not merely the case in terms of their understandings and attitudes towards the state, politics and power but also with regard to the social relationships they establish and their daily experiences.

Living a life at such geopolitical junctures highlights with poignant immediacy the forms of mistrust that interweave human relationships of all kinds. Several traders, for instance, told me about the complex emotional and health-related problems they have experienced. A Pashto-speaking trader I came to know during the course of meetings in Yiwu and Kabul shared with me difficult health issues he had faced over several years. One day, while sitting in a café in Kabul with three other Yiwu-based traders, he told us that he lives a good life – dividing his time between Kabul, Yiwu and Dubai, having a wife and children and facing no financial difficulties. Yet, nevertheless, he went on to tell us, he suffers from 'anxiety and depression', and a doctor he visits regularly in Delhi had prescribed medicine to improve the quality of his daily life:

People at home [Kabul] don't think about things because they think they are right. I'm always thinking 'why are things as they are?' My Indian doctor – who is a Hindu – tells me to stop and watch cartoons rather than the news, or to become more religious. Imagine a Hindu telling a Muslim to be more religious! But it won't work that way either. You can't just stop your thoughts and feelings. Even though I pray and don't drink alcohol, relatives of mine from our ancestral village [in central Afghanistan] tell me that I am a communist because I advise them to work and earn money for their families rather than fight alongside the Taliban. Why would I wish to become like them?

Paul Anderson has suggested that traders move and mediate between different geographies, acting ‘strategically to keep several contexts in play at once because they are faced with an unforeseeable future and marginal citizenship rights’.³³ Traders do not strategically connect Eurasian settings in a remote or detached manner, however. As Anderson himself notes in a study of merchants in the Syrian city of Aleppo, being a trader in Muslim contexts is often also connected to ‘ethics of good interaction’ premised upon a sensitive and emotionally astute response to particular social circumstances.³⁴ Many of the traders with whom I have interacted also argue that their ability to make such connections is premised on an especially sensitive mode of behaviour – unlike ‘other Afghans’, the trader above emphasises the forms of thought and feeling that influence his behaviour and shape his everyday emotional experiences. On the one hand, the reflections of life in Yiwu offered to me by traders from a range of generations underscore the extent to which deploying strategies to survive in the midst of geopolitical tensions is a source of prestige and self-worth. On the other hand, however, leading such a life is fraught and stressful and has long-term implications for them, both collectively and individually.

Conclusion

The Afghan traders explored in this book think of themselves as being informed, savvy and strategic actors operating in a world defined earlier by fraught geopolitical projects and processes. In this chapter, we have seen how a range of historic and contemporary experiences of geopolitical processes are evident in the traders’ thinking, conversations and modes of self-understandings, and these include those connected to histories of European imperialism in Asia, as well as more recent forms of intervention often framed in relationship to a discourse of ‘humanitarian intervention’. Viewed from the traders’ perspective, these multiple experiences of geopolitics enfold over and within rather than sequentially displace one another. Instead of identifying with one or another project of Eurasian connectivity, the traders emphasise that their ability to survive in contexts in which ‘everyone is a spy’ is dependent upon their ability to work ‘beneath and between governments’ rather than for them. The geopolitical contexts in which the traders work, then, play a powerful role in informing their self-understandings, their imaginations of the

³³ Anderson 2020.

³⁴ For an extended account of this approach to merchants’ ethics, see Anderson forthcoming (c).

world they inhabit and their socio-moral perceptions of those with whom they live, work and interact on a daily basis. As the ethnography presented in this chapter also demonstrates, the traders are not always or equally successful at navigating such complex and tense environments. Individual traders also complain of the negative effects on their well-being of years spent living across and between such contexts. Importantly, openly discussing such elements of their everyday lives is not regarded by the traders simply as evidence of a trader's failure or weakness, but instead as constituting evidence of their possessing the forms of sentiment that are necessary for them to be able to lead lives in Eurasia's geopolitical frontiers, sentiments that those not involved in such activities are widely regarded as lacking.

Anthropological fieldwork depends on an openness to establishing relationships that will outlive specific research projects: it is solely these kinds of relationships that enable fieldworkers to gather material that is not accessible to scholars who hold a narrower understanding of the nature of relevant knowledge. In order to establish such relationships, however, scholars conducting anthropological fieldwork must often forsake the collection of particular types of material for a reliance on different types of data. In the case of the fieldwork upon which this book is based, it was clear that formal surveys would preclude me from establishing the relationships I needed to build to understand the aspects of the traders' lives – their identities, experiences and networks – in which I was most interested. It has become a truism to state that knowledge about society and people is always partial. Fieldwork exploring mobile traders at the interstices of Eurasia's geopolitical struggles ensures that ethnographic knowledge about mobile societies is also inevitably fragmentary and kaleidoscopic.

Recognition of the constraints of fieldwork in fraught geopolitical contexts helps to identify practices that can help anthropologists working in these and comparable circumstances. This chapter has explored the relevance of two concepts that are of importance to understanding the traders' modes of living but simultaneously also helpful methodological instruments: conviviality and mistrust. Conviviality is a complex mode of sociality that combines contrasting aspects of behaviour – including suspicion and openness, humour and seriousness, as well as trust and mistrust. As such, conviviality is not only a mode of sociality observable in geopolitically fraught trading worlds but also a practice that can be adopted to help establish social relationships in fraught settings in which 'everyone is an agent'. Rather than earnestly seeking to convince my informants that I was not a spy, or assume that years of acquaintance would eventually win their total trust, I discovered that it was more

helpful to embrace their suspicions about me and to do so in a polite if jovial, respectful if sceptical – in short, convivial – manner. Acting in this manner established the grounds for sociality and exchange even in the face of the persistent presence of mistrust. Doing so also offered insights into the role played by mistrust in the traders' relationships with one another: far from being merely corrosive of social relationships, mistrust, for the traders, is an ever-present and undeniable feature of daily life, and one in relation to which all social relationships are inevitably cultivated, maintained and sustained. Chapter 2 turns its attention to an environment in which traders must hone their skills in the arts of navigating geopolitical tensions especially acutely: the countries of the former Soviet Union.