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Laleh Khalili

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THE ROADS TO POWER: THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF COUNTERINSURGENCY

LALEH KHALILI



ERIC POWELL

In *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, a Judean leader tries to stoke a rebellion against the Romans. He tells a small crowd, "They've bled us white, the bastards," and asks his comrades, "What have the Romans done for us?"

The other men reply by cataloging Rome's great building projects, transportation networks, and bureaucratic systems. The agitator, played by John Cleese, responds: "All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?"

I have always found the scene resonant yet deeply inadequate. The idea that an imperial power constructs the groundwork for civilization must have been familiar to the members of Monty Python—all of whom were educated at British institutions that once trained men to rule the colonies. In its celebration of empire, the scene says nothing about how these collateral benefits were first and foremost designed to extract resources and move the soldiers and materiel needed to control them. It ignores the way militaries use infrastructure to pacify intransigent populations and incorporate conquered peoples and places into global systems of rule.

The Talmudic passage on which the "Life of Brian" scene is based is more revealing. In Tractate Shabbat, 33b, Rabbi Judah praises the works of the Romans: "They have made streets, they have built bridges, they have erected baths." Rabbi Simon counters: "All that they made they made for themselves; they built market-places, to set harlots in them; baths, to rejuvenate themselves; bridges, to levy tolls for them." When word of this conversation reached the government, authorities exalted Rabbi Judah and ordered Rabbi Simon's execution. What the Talmud makes clear, and which Monty Python disregards, is that the social benefits of infrastructure were secondary effects of empire building.

Across time, logistics have proven crucial to the work of conquest. Napoleon, for

instance, was successful not only because he had a great strategic mind, but also because he had an administrative apparatus that ensured trains could supply his army from behind the lines. In fact, according to military historian Martin van Creveld, Napoleon was the first European leader to send commissionaires ahead of the military "in order to organize the resources of this or that town and set up a market." In Russia, Napoleon's failure was caused as much by a rare flaw in his logistical planning—locals seized the goods needed to support his frontline troops—as the exigencies of battle.

Throughout history, when armies have marched across continents, crowds roughly 50 to 150 percent their size followed. These civilians reshaped local economies as they provided militaries with a range of commercial services, including weapon and clothing repairs, food supplies, and sex work.

From the Napoleonic era to the current day, the proliferation of roads, markets, and civilian institutions has gone hand in hand with fighting battles. Wars, while destructive, are often the engines of economic and political transformations—many of which are not immediately visible. Military historians, for example, trace the emergence of the vast network of railroads across Western Europe to the logistics lines that sustained wars fought by France and Prussia throughout the 19th century. The extensive highway system in the U.S. incorporated old supply routes used during the Indian Wars to feed and clothe the settlers and conquerors of indigenous lands. Even today, the impetus for the construction of roads and highways in the U.S. often comes from the infrastructural support demanded by the Department of Defense. A 1956 U.S. law established the National System of Interstate

LALEH KHALILI is a politics professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London and the author of "Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies" (Stanford, 2013).

and Defense Highways, which was designed primarily to facilitate the movement of troops and military equipment across the country. Many of the best roads in the U.S. are still those serving defense and aerospace manufacturers in the South and Northwest.

"CIVILIZATION"

As well as being a tool to bring conquered populations to heel, roads have long been seen as markers of societal development. One of the clearest articulations of this view comes from Marshal Thomas-Robert Bugeaud, who invaded and colonized Algeria in the 19th century. In his assessment of his Algerian adversaries, Bugeaud claimed that Arabs "have none of these major centers of government, population, and commerce at the heart of a civilized country nor any of those large arteries that circulate the life of civilized nations: no inland points, no major roads, no factories, no villages, nor farms."

Europeans like Bugeaud saw roads, markets, and schools as vectors of civilization—the trinity that eases the incorporation and pacification of indigenous populations. Hubert Lyautey—who helped conquer Indochina (1894-1897), Madagascar (1897-1902), and Morocco (intermittently and in different roles from 1903 until 1925)—acclaimed roads in particular as instruments of cultural advancement. In Morocco, Lyautey boasted of building about 1,000 miles of new roads to connect seaports to inland cities and Morocco to Algeria and Tunisia, integrating the country into French colonial administrative and security systems.

The construction process itself is an extraordinary way to transform labor systems. In Madagascar, where communal and village labor was mostly agricultural, France created a proletariat forced into *corvée* labor to build streets and thoroughfares. From the colonizing power's first actions, it created racialized work regimes where, of all the peoples

of Madagascar, the Malagasy were exploited for road construction. The racial hierarchies this system generated persisted long after the French decamped.

HEARTS AND MINDS

Most of today's wars are neither the pitched battles of Napoleon's day nor the large-scale colonial invasions of the late 19th century. This is an age of counterinsurgencies, yet these "small wars" still nearly always require large infrastructure investments. Counterinsurgencies are asymmetrical (one side has superior firepower) and unconventional (a formal mili-

"CALCULATED SELF-INTEREST, NOT EMOTION, IS WHAT COUNTS."

tary fights a guerrilla force). Because unconventional fighters cannot survive without the day-to-day support of civilian populations (who provide food, shelter, and information), counterinsurgencies are as much about winning over local populations as they are about the military defeat of insurgents.

In a 2006 essay published in *Military Review*, the Australian guru of U.S. counterinsurgency Lt. Col. David Kilcullen argued that interfacing with civilians was an essential part of a winning strategy:

This is the true meaning of the phrase "hearts and minds," which comprises two separate components. "Hearts" means persuading people their best interests are served by your success; "minds" means convincing them that you can protect them and that resisting you is pointless. Note that neither concept has to do with

whether people like you. Calculated self-interest, not emotion, is what counts.

To convince residents that an occupying force is in their best interest, the logistics of counterinsurgency are as significant as the actual fighting. This is not only because the transportation of goods and materiel maintains forces or that infrastructure sometimes remains after the war (as the Roman aqueducts did), but also because the *very process* of logistics provision does vital political work.

Two modern examples I want to discuss are Afghanistan and Palestine. In both locations—as in dozens of countries where counterinsurgencies have been fought—roads and other infrastructure projects don't simply serve immediate or tactical military functions. They are instruments of social engineering. The approaches of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Israeli authorities in Palestine reveal divergent uses of roads for similar ends. Both seek to assert control, one by directing and integrating local commercial activity and the other by imposing a security regime that segregates populations.

Afghanistan has only about 7,500 miles of paved road. Given the vastness of the country, this is a tiny number. Since 2002, the U.S. military and other donors (including USAID and NATO) have built around 2,000 of these miles. In Afghanistan, the U.S. military leaders considered roads so significant to their fight against the Taliban that local commanders spent the vast majority of their emergency funds (nearly \$900 million out of a total of \$1.3 billion) on road construction. In many instances, these roads are either continuations or restorations of routes originally built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the 1960s (as Cold War infrastructure) or extended by the Russians after 1980. The new roads paid for by the U.S. connect the largest cities to supply routes within Afghanistan. As Kilcullen wrote in the *Small Wars Journal* blog in 2008:

Like the Romans, counterinsurgents through history have engaged in road-building as a tool for projecting military force, extending governance and the rule of law, enhancing political communication, and bringing economic development, health, and education to the population. Clearly, roads that are patrolled by friendly forces or secured by local allies also have the tactical benefit of channeling and restricting insurgent movement and compartmenting terrain across which guerrillas could otherwise move freely. But the political impact of road-building is even more striking than its tactical effect.

By connecting far-flung communities to administrative centers and easing transportation between sites of production and markets, roads are a means of economic integration. In Afghanistan, the U.S. saw roads as a way to strengthen market exposure for farmers and pastoralists. The amount that safer roads lowered the cost of shipping consumer goods even became a metric to gauge the effectiveness of counterinsurgency efforts. The use of trade to quantify success indicates the inextricability of counterinsurgency and market economies.

Tactically, roads can also be used as offensive means of separating armed fighters from the population. Because roads are patrolled, guerrillas in mountainous regions often have to leave populated valleys and escape to higher altitudes. In the same *Small Wars Journal* post, Kilcullen wrote:

Instead of being in the villages among the people, the insurgents are now forced up into the sparsely populated (often uninhabited) hills. This has political as well as security effects: The population gets a visual impression of the enemy firing down into the valley

(where they live) and the security forces defending the villages, rather than (as previously) the enemy living in the villages and the security forces attacking the villages to get at the enemy.

Kilcullen does not mention it, but this division also cuts off the unconventional forces from the civilians who can support them with food and medicine.

In addition, road building and other logistics projects tend to consolidate dominant institutions. These don't just include the nation-state, although the role of the state is enormously important. In counterinsurgencies, such projects also reinforce local power constellations that the counterinsurgents see as beneficial. Again Kilcullen is instructive:

The road project involves a series of negotiated agreements with tribal and district elders—the approach the PRT [provincial reconstruction team] is taking is to make an agreement with the elders to construct the portion of the road that runs through their tribal territory. This has allowed them to better understand the geographical and functional limits of each elder's authority, and to give the people a sense of ownership over the road: Since a local workforce has constructed it (and is then paid to protect it), they are more likely to defend it against Taliban attacks. Also, the project generates disputes (over access, resources, timing, pay, labor etc.) that have to be resolved between tribes and community groups, and this allows Afghan government representatives to take the lead in resolving issues and negotiating settlements, thereby connecting the population to the provincial and local administration and demonstrating the tangible benefits of supporting the government.

This insistence on tribes as *the* prevailing and legitimate power holders in the region echoes the Sandeman system, established in 1877 by the colonel British Indian Robert Sandeman in Baluchistan in today's Pakistan. Britain made tribal leaders responsible for defending the roads from bandits and implementing British colonial policy. The system secured tribal leaders' power over their own tribesmen while making the leaders themselves beholden to colonial masters. As a proxy system

ROADS—AND LOGISTICS PROVISION MORE GENERALLY—CREATE THE UNDERLYING RATIONALE FOR THE STATE AND ITS SECURITY APPARATUS.

of rule, British colonial officials felt this system was less costly than direct forms of domination, though colonialists, imperialists, and counterinsurgents have debated its effectiveness ever since.

THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF OCCUPATION

In contrast to the U.S. attempts to incorporate Afghan villages into international flows of capital, Israel uses roads to isolate Palestinian communities from neighboring countries and the global market. In Palestine, Israeli-constructed bypass roads physically block Palestinians from accessing regional trade networks. So far, Israel has built more than 1,000 miles of road, which are primarily used by Israeli settlers and citizens. Unlike the organically developed Palestinian roads, these thoroughfares ignore the

natural contours of the land and blow through hills and farmland to connect Israeli settlements to each other and to cities inside the Green Line—the 1949 armistice line that served as Israel’s de facto border until 1967. Since settlements are central to the military strategies of the Israeli state (as outposts overlooking Palestinian habitations), the roads linking them facilitate surveillance and control of Palestinians.

The security of these roads is considered so paramount that Palestinians on Palestinian roads that intersect with the bypass roads are often not allowed to cross. Even where the checkpoints, earth-mounds, roadblocks, and fences can be negotiated quickly, avoiding a bypass road can add 10-25 miles to a trip that is a quarter that length.

These roads are meant to ensure the safety of settlers in the West Bank by allowing them swift and unrestricted mobility and providing police and military forces direct routes to their communities. Furthermore, the roads partition the West Bank into variegated areas with different access regimes: Areas A, B, and C, as well as seam zones, free-fire zones, and a whole series of other politically differentiated areas result in vast bureaucracies with confusing permit requirements that impede the movement of Palestinians.

Israeli bypass roads also expropriate Palestinian land. According to the UNDP, Israel has confiscated over 40,000 acres from Palestinians to make way for roads. Israeli law ostensibly only allows the state to seize territory in instances of military necessity, a designation that can be challenged in court. To justify bypass roads, Israel instead draws upon legislation from Jordan, which previously controlled the West Bank. Israel uses the Jordanian equivalent of eminent domain to lay claim to Palestinian land, arguing that, at least in this instance, Jordanian law should apply in the West Bank.

In Palestine, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, road building employs locals, thus co-opting

some segment of the population into the system of economic reproduction. This employment process—often drawing on ethnic, national, or linguistic difference—contributes to divide-and-rule schemes that allow rulers to govern otherwise restive populations. The Israeli Ministry of Transport, for instance, hires Palestinians in dire financial need to work on road constructions. This incorporates populations into new labor regimes and makes them beholden to those already in power.

CIRCULATION

In his reflection on the development of security regimes, the theorist Michel Foucault emphasizes the importance of circulation to the police and to creating structures of power. When Foucault discusses circulation, he doesn’t just mean physical transportation networks like the roads themselves; he focuses on “the set of regulations, constraints, and limits, or the facilities and encouragements that will allow the circulation of men and things.”

From these, he argues, “stem those typical police regulations, some of which seek to suppress vagrancy, others to facilitate the circulation of goods in this or that direction, [and] others that want to prevent qualified workers from leaving their place of work, or especially the kingdom. After health and the objects of bare necessity, after the population itself, this whole field of circulation will become the object of police.” As such, roads—and logistics provision more generally—create the underlying rationale for the state and its security apparatus.

Circulation is so central to capitalism that the whole of Marx’s second volume of *Capital*, good bits of his third volume, and his *Grundrisse* are dedicated to reflections on “the annihilation of space by time”—or the ability of mechanical modes of transportation and communication to accelerate the delivery of goods to market. Today, roads are increasingly built on lands owned by corporations (or a combination of private

and public interests) and facilitate both transportation and communication (as often telegraph, telephone, and internet cables are laid along roadsides). Roads, therefore, remain the embodiments of the circulation of commodities and capital par excellence. And every road built by an imperial power reinforces the economic system advanced by that power. This fungibility between infrastructure for capital accumulation

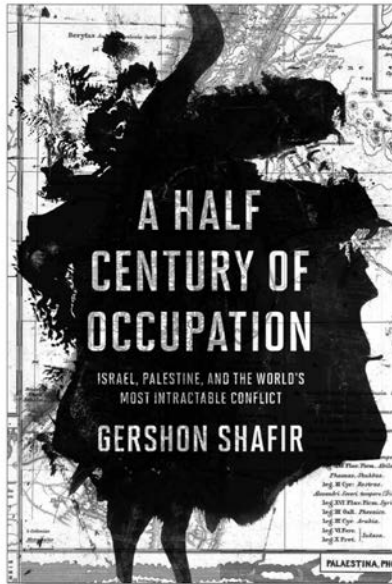
and that for fighting wars is as fundamental to our era as it was in ancient Rome and Napoleonic France. Infrastructural power enables extraction, circulation, and accumulation—and throughout history, it has emerged from the waging of war.

This article is based on a lecture given on April 18, 2016, at Georgetown University. ●



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