WAR AND PEACE IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE: BIO-POLITICS OF DISABILITY IN
KANDAHAR AND BEYOND

GUERRE ET PAIX DANS LE VILLAGE PLANÉTAIRE: LEW BIOPOLITIQUES DE
L'HANDICAP DANS *KANDAHAR* ET DANS L'AGENDA ANTI-GUERRE

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Abstract

War and conflict are endemic in contemporary global society. Conflict situations not only result in more people with disabilities, but also disproportionately affect people with disabilities already living in conflict-ridden situations. This paper argues that disabled bodies caught amidst contemporary conflict situations highlight the somewhat paradoxical nature of the world we live in today—where global economic and political forces that instigate conflict are also responsible for alleviating its aftermath. These arguments are made through a bio-political analysis of Iranian film-maker Mohsen Makhmalbaf's 2001 movie *Kandahar* set in the war-ravaged deserts of Afghanistan. Using this story as backdrop, this paper discusses and critiques the bio-politics of contemporary conflicts and the dispensing of post-conflict humanitarian aid and offers an alternative from of bio-politics exercised by people with disabilities as part of the global anti-war agenda.

Keywords: war, disability, Kandahar, film, Makhmalbaf

Résumé

La guerre et la paix représentent une part endémique de la société planétaire contemporaine. Les situations de conflits ont pour effet d'augmenter le nombre de personnes ayant des incapacités. De plus, les situations de conflits affectent de façon disproportionnée les personnes ayant des incapacités. Cet essai soutient que les personnes ayant des incapacités sont coincées dans des situations de conflits contemporains mettant ainsi en évidence la nature quelque peu paradoxale du monde dans lequel nous vivons aujourd'hui, c'est-à-dire un monde dans lequel les forces économiques et politiques mondiales responsables des conflits sont aussi responsables d'en soulager les conséquences. Ces arguments sont formulés par une analyse biopolitique du film *Kandahar* réalisé par le cinéaste iranien Mohsen Makhmalbaf en 2001. Ce film met en scène la guerre ravageant les déserts de l'Afghanistan. En utilisant cette histoire comme toile de fond, cet essai analyse et critique les biopolitiques des conflits contemporains et la distribution de l'aide humanitaire post-conflit. Il propose également une alternative se basant sur les biopolitiques exercées par les personnes ayant des incapacités contribuant à les inclure dans l'agenda anti-guerre au niveau planétaire.

Mots-clés: guerre, paix, biopolitiques, handicap, conflits, Kandahar, aide humanitaire

War and conflict are endemic in contemporary society. Conflict situations disproportionately affect people with disabilities, and also result in more people becoming disabled both directly through war and indirectly through infrastructural breakdown (International Disability and Development Consortium, 2000). This paper discusses the story of Afghanistan, a nation that has been the epicentre of global conflict and humanitarian aid, and one that is becoming characterized by its close-to-one-million citizens who have been disabled in conflict-related incidents (Miles, 2001). This paper argues that people with disabilities, caught amidst conflict and post-conflict humanitarian aid, embody the bio-politics of contemporary conflict situations. The arguments presented in this paper unfold within the backdrop of *Kandahar*, Iranian movie-maker Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film about ordinary lives in the rugged terrain of contemporary rural Afghanistan.

Kandahar is not about disability. It is the political story of a young journalist named Nafas who escaped Afghanistan with her family, but must return and race against time in an attempt to rescue her sister. The sister, who has acquired a disability from a landmine, has written to Nafas about her intent to commit suicide by the next solar eclipse because of the gender-based persecution that she faces daily in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. The setting of the movie therefore precedes the events of September 11, 2001[1].

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[1] A sequel to the movie titled "Return to Kandahar" has been recently released on DVD and depicts how life for ordinary Afghans has not changed much since the first movie and might have gotten more difficult after the United States-led bombings in 2002.

Nafas's journey to find her sister constitutes the central narrative of the movie. Scattered throughout this narrative are images of disability embodied by real-life characters and played by non-professional actors—ordinary Afghans whom Nafas encounters during her odyssey through the war-ravaged terrain of the country. These images pay testimony to the paradoxical nature of the world we live in today, where the global forces that instigate conflict are also responsible for alleviating its aftermath.

Movies about war and disability are cultural artifacts that carry symbolic, moral, and political messages. The cinematic landscape of such movies serves as the backdrop for the stories of the principal characters and also as a reflection of the social and political terrain of the setting (Safran, 2001). Therefore, the narrative of *Kandahar*, the movie reflects the broader socio-political narrative of Afghanistan, the nation.

Afghanistan has experienced almost 30 continuous years of armed conflict, most of which has been international in nature. When Soviet troops entered Afghanistan in December 1979, the United States (albeit with support from the Saudi government) decided to use its military and financial muscle to fuel the subsequent anti-Soviet jihad or holy war (Zolberg, Suhrke, & Aguayo, 1989; Danahar, 2006). At the same time, massive amounts of humanitarian aid were funneled into refugee camps in Pakistan hosting Afghan civilians trying to escape the ravages of never-ending civil war. It is widely believed that these same refugee camps were strategically used as breeding grounds for recruiting and training jihadi warriors with support from the United States (Zolberg, Suhrke, & Aguayo, 1989).

According to some analysts, Western-funded guns and training camps successfully drove out the Soviet troops, but also radicalized and armed generations of young Afghan men and created the instability in Afghanistan that produced the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Says Sami Aziz (2003), director of the Afghan Association of London, an Afghan refugee himself,

> The rivalry between the East and West, between Russians and NATO, was enacted out in Afghanistan. Different sides supported different factions. Before, the Ministry of Defense found it difficult to afford 1,000 rifles or shoes for Afghan soldiers; but then suddenly the country was armed to its teeth. For every Afghan there was a landmine, almost one in two Afghans had a Kalshnikov. In Afghanistan you could find an enormous quantity of weapons from a host of different countries (p.13).

In the movie Kandahar, Makhmalbaf makes strategic use of scenes and dialogue to illustrate the culture of violence that has been bred across Afghanistan as a result of over two decades of international military intervention. For instance, there is a powerful scene in which Nafas encounters a good-Samaritan village doctor who offers her an automated handgun, which he insists she might need to protect herself along her journey. When he sees the look of surprise in Nafas's face, he shrugs and says in a voice that betrays the tragic irony of life in this part of the world, "weapons are the only modern thing in Afghanistan".

But the most powerful depiction of the extent of devastation exported to Afghanistan by international funding comes from the characters with disabilities in the movie. The character of Hayat, a young man with an amputated arm presumably from a landmine, is an example. Hayat is shown haggling with Red Cross workers for a pair of prosthetic legs. When the Red Cross workers question why he would need prosthetic legs

when his arm was amputated, Hayat says matter-of-factly, "There are landmines everywhere. It would be good to have a spare pair". Further along in the movie, Hayat is shown trying to sell the prosthetic legs to a passerby. The passerby declines saying, "I have my own, thank you", to which Hayat retorts, again very matter-of-factly, "These fields are full of mines; it's good to have replacements".

It is characters like Hayat, either walking around using UN-funded crutches or carrying Red Cross-provided prostheses across their amputated (thus shortened) limbs, silhouetted against the arid Afghan desert, that tell the most powerful story of the bio-politics of globally governed war and peace efforts. They simultaneously represent both bodies that don't count in the pursuit of global political agendas, as well as bodies that reify the humanitarian image of the global power consortia that resulted in their predicament in the first place.

It is on these bodies that the true character of contemporary wars is most vividly inscribed. Contemporary wars, according to political science scholars James Der Derian (2002) and Michael Shapiro (2002), are virtuous wars or hybrid coalitions of war and humanitarianism. In recent times, the legitimization of war has changed from protecting the sovereignty of nation states to the "administering of life" and the "fostering of democracy" in regions perceived beyond one's national boundaries (Der Derian, 2002; Shapiro, 2002). Within this new terrain of war and peace, therefore, the international flow of arms and combat troops go hand-in-hand with the international flow of humanitarian aid. This dual and somewhat paradoxical nature of international military intervention is most clearly reflected in public statements made by former British Prime Minister Tony

Blair and former American President George W. Bush while justifying their combined military intervention in Afghanistan in 2002. While Blair evoked the concept of "positive engagement" in Afghanistan (Shapiro, 2002), Bush stated, "as we strike military targets, we will also drop food, the United States is a friend to the Afghan people" (Der Derian, 2002, p. 5).

Although Makhmalbaf's movie precedes the most recent international intervention in Afghanistan, the following scene from the movie pays powerful homage to the paradox of so-called coalitions of war and humanitarian aid. This scene begins with the aerial view from a chopper, which we later find out is a Red Cross chopper escorting Nafas across the Iranian border into Afghanistan. As the chopper descends into the barren Afghan desert below, a few encampments come into view. On further descent, we catch a glimpse of about 25 men wearing traditional Afghan clothing moving steadily in the direction of the chopper. At this point, it is not clear to the viewer who these men are or what they are doing. Halfway through the movie, in another scene, things start falling into place, quite literally. In this scene the vantage point of the camera has changed. The viewer is now at ground level outside an encampment of the International Red Cross where Western European health workers are shown fitting prostheses for young and old Afghan men with amputated limbs. Suddenly, at the sound of an approaching chopper, the men grab their crutches and start moving toward the descending chopper in hopes of retrieving the heaven-sent or UN-sent prostheses being air-dropped from the chopper a few seconds later.

This powerful scene not only questions the head-in-the-sand complacency of international aid efforts directed at Afghan citizens, but also highlights the inadequacy of such efforts that more than often take the form of humanitarian handouts and not the kind of long-term projects that will empower and enable the Afghan economy and infrastructure (Aziz, 2003). This scene highlights how disabled Afghans and Afghans in general need and deserve more than just plastic legs; they need peace, stability, and a chance at life.

Unfortunately post-war peace building and humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan have mimicked the war-making efforts that precede them in their intent and motivation (Loescher, 2001). They are seldom motivated by the real needs of Afghan people. Instead, they are motivated by global political agendas and are often exercises in image-building and moneymaking. Take the case of recent post-war reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. According to a BBC report from 2006, Afghanistan is brimming with expensive foreign contractors and consultants who are often duplicating or replacing work that could be carried out by local Afghans. In the words of the Afghan finance minister from 2002 to 2004, Mr. Ashraf Ghani, "The international aid being poured into Afghanistan is being misused and wasted and might have done more harm than good" (Poston, 2006).

It is this inadequacy of international political agendas that *Kandahar* most effectively highlights through its characters with disabilities. In doing so, *Kandahar* stands apart from other movies on war and disability in which disability is often used to present a range of symbolic meanings from brave, patriotic sacrifice to victimization in an

unjust war (Safran, 2001). *Kandahar* is devoid of fascination with disability as tragic metaphor for international conflict. The characters with disabilities in the movie are neither victims nor heroes, but ordinary people who have survived over two decades of armed conflict. And their survival does not just represent their own individual stories, but the story of a nation. According to Shapiro (2001), cinematic characters often represent the geographic imaginaries of the spaces they inhabit. Along these lines, the characters of *Kandahar* perhaps embody a chronology of geographic imaginaries that have accompanied and legitimized various stages in the process of contemporary war and peace efforts in Afghanistan. These stages have run from a "geography victimized" where the Western World intervened to save Afghans from their Soviet oppressors, to a "geography forgotten" signifying the post-cold war years in which Afghanistan was abandoned by the international community, to a "geography evil" where the Afghan people were punished for housing the most wanted criminal of our times, and finally a "geography comrade" where Afghans are supposedly allies in the so-called war against terror. These geographic imaginaries have been irredeemably entangled with moral and political projects in Afghanistan, often with disastrous consequences for Afghan people themselves.

While *Kandahar* does a wonderful job of questioning these moral and political projects, it offers no solutions. Some representatives of the international disability community have, however, suggested a humble beginning at doing so. One example is Laura Hershey, an American disability rights activist who writes a web-based column called Crip Commentary. In one of her columns, "War and Peace are Disability Issues",

Hershey (2001) questions the appropriateness of using her space on Crip Commentary to advocate peace in faraway lands when there are plenty of disability issues closer to home such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, Personal Assistant services, etc. She answers her own questions by saying that war and peace anywhere in the world *are* disability issues, and that disabled people can be powerful spokespersons against the implications of unjust foreign and military policies of their respective states. Hershey exhorts other disabled persons and their allies to join her in renouncing war and conflict as a grave violation of disability rights.

Another example is the organization Disabled Peoples International (DPI) revisiting its commitment to the cause of international peace first manifested through the adoption of a Peace Statement at the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima, Japan in 1982. Over two decades later in 2002, DPI held its World Assembly in Sapporo, Japan and once again included a statement on peace in the Sapporo Platform, one of the documents arising out of the World Assembly. This statement, "Peace is a Disability Issue", calls upon all people with disabilities to join the movement for international peace:

> Let all of us join together in a worldwide movement for peace. Let us call for all nations' economies to be transformed from war economies to peace economies. Let us insist that the $600 billion now spent on armaments is diverted to socially useful projects. Let us demand that the world leaders now, in this momentous epoch, where we have the power to destroy and cripple, begin the enormous task of redirecting our resources, our productions, our talents and our abilities from the creation of the weapons of war to the creation of instruments of life (Disabled Peoples International, Canada, 2003).

Other examples abound of people with disabilities taking an individual or collective stance against war including disability rights activists courting arrest at anti-

war protests and the creation of local anti-war groups such as "Crips against War" in Chicago, U.S.A (Russel1, 2003).

These examples indicate that the disability community is creating its own front on the international peace agenda. It could be argued that this new anti-war disability front is an exercise in Michel Foucault's powerful concept of international citizenship.

> There is such a thing as international citizenship which has its rights, which has its duties and which implies a commitment to rise up against power, whoever its author, whoever the victims. After all, we are all governed…and, by that token, our fates are bound up together (Macey, 1993, p. 437–438).

This new anti-war disability front also appears to be based on a form of bio-politics contrary to the one so powerfully exposed in *Kandahar* where people with disabilities are attempting to lead an anti-war insurrection using their own lives and bodies as weapons, so to speak. It is a form of bio-politics in which people with disabilities draw attention to their own bodies and life conditions as a statement of the consequences of war and imperialist agendas that favour funding wars overfunding a more accessible and inclusive world. It is a form of bio-politics that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004) hint as having revolutionary potential, one that becomes the expressive tool of the "multitude"— a term they use to describe representatives of a universal democracy working together to subvert the limited nation-specific democracies of today. And finally it is a bio-politics that locates people with disabilities at the forefront of the international anti-war movement.

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