



Assembling marginality in northern Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This article illustrates how Gilgit-Baltistan in northern Pakistan—bordering Afghanistan, China, and India—has been part of an “assemblage of marginality” since the region was incorporated in 1947 and 1948. We situate our case amidst recent scholarship that seeks to go beyond mere location at the territorial limits of the nation-state as the defining feature of a border area. In addition, we emphasize the temporal aspects of how marginality in Gilgit-Baltistan has been assembled through four constituent processes: (1) the continuity of the colonial legacy in the western Himalaya, poignantly highlighted by the ongoing dispute between India and Pakistan that has resulted in Gilgit-Baltistan’s constitutionally ambiguous status today; (2) the pervasiveness of nationalist histories and cultural tropes about Gilgit-Baltistan that have been constructed for the post-colonial state; (3) a local political economy subservient to a centralist agenda that has been amplified by the introduction of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); (4) the formation of local identities in Gilgit-Baltistan, marked by exclusion from the state, which offers insights into marginality as identity. In sum, we argue that this assemblage of marginality goes far beyond Gilgit-Baltistan and provides ample points of comparison with marginal spaces in other locations around the globe.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the study of borders and boundaries has gone through a number of shifts that have resulted in a readjustment of the research foci that now define the field. For instance, Wilson and Donnan (2012, p. 13) argue that there has been an overall turn away from an emphasis on nation, state, and periphery to culture, ethnography, process, social practice, and reverse margin–center relations. Recent scholarship has also explored borders as “epistemic angle” and “method” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Sidaway, 2015, p. 217), and an abundance of historical and contemporary case studies have highlighted the complex relationship between the state, territory as a political technology, and everyday lives at the border (see, e.g., Gellner, 2013; Harris, 2013; Megoran, 2017; Newman, 1999; Paasi, 1996; Reeves, 2014; Rumford, 2012; Saxer & Zhang, 2017; Shneidermann, 2013; Van Schendel, 2003). Contributing to this literature, in their introduction to a special issue on borders in South Asia in this journal, Cons

and Sanyal (2013) emphasize the potential of bringing border studies into conversation with the concept of marginality. They argue that calling borderlands “margins” has become “academic common sense” (6), but also note that the larger body of literature on marginality—especially studies deriving from research on South Asia—remains underexplored. In this respect, Cons and Sanyal (2013, p. 9) make the crucial point that the lens of marginality might free border studies from an inherent spatialization at the fringes of the nation-state by opening up a comparative perspective on a range of different locales. Such “articulations across space,” they argue, might also fruitfully engage with and remedy tendencies of equating margins with “non-elite” in the literature on marginality. Cons and Sanyal’s argument in favor of space as a means to overcome the shortage of research comparing borderlands and other margins is timely, and in this article we seek to take this angle to Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan’s northern administrative region on the border with Afghanistan, China, and India. However, we also attempt to add to Cons and Sanyal’s focus on spatialization by emphasizing the temporal aspects of marginality—the history of assembling the margins that provides points of comparison and distinction vis-à-vis other “marginal spaces” in borderlands and elsewhere. Following DeLanda (2016, p. 2), we perceive this assemblage of marginality as consisting of “parts” that “are not

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uniform either in nature or origin” but that are nevertheless “fitted together.” These different parts—in the case of Gilgit-Baltistan, the legacy of colonial rule, nationalist histories constructed for the post-colonial state, a local political economy subservient to a statist agenda, and marginality as identity—stand in shifting relationships to each other. We describe the nature of these relationships as a “symbiosis” (Deleuze & Parnet, 1977, p. 69) that co-functions with other assemblages of marginality far beyond Gilgit-Baltistan.

Our analysis of the process of assembling marginality in Gilgit-Baltistan is informed by three strains in political geography: the border at the territorial limits of the state; the border as part of a frontier and a zone of overlapping influence; and the border as a line that both divides and yet accommodates connections—personal, material, or emotive—across sovereign states (this last strain is characteristic of studies that focus on South Asia).

First, border areas’ geographical location on the fringes of the nation-state has remained a principal element in constituting borderlands, and propinquity continues to inform borderland scholarship. Studies have highlighted local agency and the borderland populations’ strategic and resourceful positioning (e.g., Baud & Van Schendel, 1997; Gellner, 2013; Giersch, 2006; Harris, 2013; Murton, 2017; Reeves, 2014; Saxer, 2016), as well as the transformative impact of national, geopolitical, and material forces at nation-state boundaries (Baghel & Nüsser, 2015; Fravel, 2008; Goldstein, 2006; Karrar, 2010; Steinberg & Kristoffersen, 2017). In his recent critique of this spatial fix, Jinba (2017) even goes so far as to compare the Sino–Tibetan borderlands with the city of Hong Kong—both a “center” and a borderland on the territorial fringes of China.

Second, while states may frequently project borders as demarcating sovereignty, borders have also been seen as part of the frontier and as zones of overlapping influence. For instance, in his *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, Lattimore approached frontiers as overlapping zones of power, seeing variations in the Great Wall of China as evidence of ever-shifting political and military power at the margins of the state (1962[1940], p. 238). Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes* describes frontiers as “contact zones” that “shift the center of gravity” and invoke “the space and time where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect” (2008[1992], p. 8). In *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*, Marsden and Hopkins (2011, pp. 2–3) frame the frontier as a place of “complex dynamism” that is “continually occupied, defined and redefined by the people, communities and political entities that claim it as their own.” Finally, in a recent article, Jones et al. similarly argue that “border barriers, corridors and transit camps become elements ... in a structuring of space that reconfigures ... geopolitics” (2017, p. 3), indicating how flows across borders influence national and regional polities. Certainly, in particular contexts—the influx of refugees, for example, or goods moving outside of state regulations, or the fluctuation of Arctic sea-ice edges—the border can be conceptualized as a shifting line of sovereignty (Mountz, 2011; Steinberg & Kristoffersen, 2017).

Third, reference to South Asian borders inevitably raises the specter of conflict between the nuclear rivals India and Pakistan. We would be remiss not to mention here that Gilgit-Baltistan—an administrative unit within Pakistan that has a constitutionally ambiguous status—was born out of the Kashmir conflict. This conflict, now in its seventieth year, underscores the lasting trauma of division in South Asia not only in 1947, but also in 1971 (Saikia, 2011; Zamindar, 2010). At the same time, an exclusive emphasis on states of conflict runs the risk of overlooking how South Asian border regimes have steadily transformed ideas of sovereignty, citizenship, trajectories of material exchanges and, more broadly, daily life itself (Harris, 2013; Shneidermann, 2013). In this regard,

memory allows affective connections within South Asia (as well as other parts of Asia) to traverse internal boundaries such as ethnic and sectarian divisions (Mostowlansky, 2018a, forthcoming; Smith, 2013).

These three strands—the border at the edge, the border as a zone of overlapping influence, and (South Asian) borders that are projected as impassable yet are permeable in a multitude of ways—are fundamental to how we approach Gilgit-Baltistan. Beyond being a contact zone with place-specific characteristics, Gilgit-Baltistan’s classification as a border area is not, we argue, a priori spatially fixed. Being located at the territorial limits of the nation-state is neither Gilgit-Baltistan’s primary marker nor the only reason why it is often described as a “border area”—an expression that has entered the Urdu language and replaced its vernacular counterparts in all but the most formal usage. Instead, we situate Gilgit-Baltistan’s border area classification in a historically continuous process of assembling cultural, economic, political, and spatial marginality, marked by exclusion through the erection of internal boundaries and “networks of marginalization, dislocation, subaltern theorization, and contested history” (Cons & Sanyal, 2013, p. 6). Disaggregating the meaning of Gilgit-Baltistan’s border area classification, our approach has applicability to any such term (for example, “borderlands,” “frontiers,” “margins”) that captures assemblages of marginality.

Thus, we offer an alternative approach to conceptualizing border areas in which the situatedness of such locales on the fringes of the nation-state is not the only determining variable. We draw on literature focusing on sites in Greece, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Tajikistan that frames marginality as an outcome of the interplay of multipolar forces that work toward constituting center and periphery (Anwar, 2016; Das & Poole, 2004; Green, 2005; Mostowlansky, 2017, forthcoming; Tsing, 1993 and 1994; Williams, Vira & Chopra, 2011). Thus, if a border area is a marginal space—and if marginality can be argued to be constituted through polity, whether national, regional, or local—then a border area can be disengaged from the territorial limits of the state. By foregrounding the process of assembling marginality, our disaggregation of Gilgit-Baltistan’s border area status offers a framework for doing just that.

In this article, we—a Pakistani (Karrar) and a Swiss (Mostowlansky) academic—build on ethnographic and historical data from Gilgit-Baltistan. Karrar has been visiting the region for more than two decades; his ongoing research, which he has been developing since 2012, explores how cross-border connections with China impact local polities. Mostowlansky has conducted regular ethnographic and archival research in and on Gilgit-Baltistan since 2012. In the following, we will draw on field notes based on extensive participant observation, several dozen interviews conducted in the framework of long-term fieldwork (Karrar: 5 months from 2012 to 2017; Mostowlansky: 8 months from 2013 to 2016), and written sources and literature gathered in northern Pakistan during separate periods of research as well as during a month of joint fieldwork that we conducted while teaching a field course on the history and ecology of Gilgit-Baltistan in June 2016.

In the following, we analyze the historical and contemporary process of assembling marginality in Gilgit-Baltistan in four parts. In the first part, we explore the legacy of colonial rule in the region, offering an overview of its place within the larger schema of projecting colonial power along the Himalaya, and how, in the seventy years since independence, Gilgit-Baltistan has had to contend with a constitutionally ambiguous status as a result of Pakistan’s geopolitical ambitions over greater Kashmir. In the second part, we discuss Gilgit-Baltistan’s integration into Pakistan’s cultural imagination, a process that has fostered marginality and actualized internal boundaries. In the third part, we analyze the amplification of

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