

Visual Propaganda in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan – Part 3. *The land belongs to those who till it!*

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Abstract

In this article, a single poster about the land reform carried out by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan is discussed. The starting point for the project is the statement that persuasion is more effective than compulsion and that the Afghan communists did not find any formula to engage in effective dialogue with their society. The primary question is: what kind of communication and what sort of themes/motifs played a significant role in conveying revolutionary ideology aimed at a society where a majority, with political potential, could not read or write? The methodological basis of the project and article is R. Barthes's *Rhetoric of the Image* and the analysis is supplemented with other pictorial items (photographs, postage stamps) related to the land reform as well as literary pieces and scientific studies of this historical event.

Keywords: *poster, propaganda, peasant, land reform*

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And finally, it came, the day when we were freed from the landlord. Look, I always said that one day, one day would come and we, the miserable, we would regain our rights. Finally, my words have come true. Let's thank God that we've lived to see this day.¹

The land reform has a strategic plan, strategic slogans, and specific tactics.²

1 Introduction

The article, as a continuation of two texts published in 2015 and 2017 respectively,³ is a part of a research project on the propaganda employed by the government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (hereafter: DRA) representing the political-ideological programme of the would-be Marxist-Leninist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (hereafter: PDPA).⁴

As in the two previous articles, the starting point of the discussion is a premise that the language as well as the means of communication applied by any government while addressing its audience – in this case Afghan society – are of particular importance. The authorities are granted trust by the citizens who at the same time have the right to prolong (or not) their credit of confidence depending on the current political, social and/or economic situation. In extreme cases, the citizens can renounce their allegiance to the central government and its representatives at the various levels of public administration, seeking to (forcibly) remove it from power. To prevent situations such

³ M. M. Kłagisz, *Visual Propaganda in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan – Preliminary Report*, "The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture" 2015, no. 14(2), pp. 101–122; M. M. Kłagisz, *Visual Propaganda in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan – Part 2. Leading Role of the Party*, "The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture. New Series" 2017, no. 5(1), pp. 67–87.

⁴ I used the expression "would-be Leninist" for the first time in *Part 2*. following O. Roy's statement: "[o]ne can wonder if Afghan communists (who always refrained from referring to communism) are truly communists" (O. Roy, *The Origins of the Afghan Communist Party*, "Central Asian Survey" 1988, no. 7(2–3), p. 52). This time I would use "would-be Marxist-Leninist" because of O. Roy's utterance that "[t]hey [the communists – MMK] include a superficial acquaintance with Marxism, a total failure to analyse the existing situation, and a profound conviction that they were inventing a new brand of socialism, suitable for Third World countries and without an intermediate stages" (O. Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge 1986, p. 84).



as this from happening and to remain in power, the authorities should use phraseology that is as clear for the audience as possible. That is the only way to convince the people to accept a particular version of politics and vision of reality. Consequently, the authorities try to gain an absolute dominance over sources of information and means of communication to control, regulate, and if necessary to censor, what citizens read, watch and listen to and how they do so.⁵ Such tasks can be accomplished in various ways, by means of press, radio, television, as well as literature or the fine arts. The choice of techniques of persuasion results from a number of historical-cultural factors (e.g. the presence or lack of manuscript/print/painting traditions) as well as socio-cultural ones (e.g. the level of illiteracy, quality and character of education). An effective choice guarantees success but an inappropriate one risks making the whole undertaking failure.

Talking about persuasion, one additional socio-political factor should be taken into account – namely, the social base of the government. Its range and structure is crucial in shaping the language used by politicians while speaking to the people. If the social base of the government is broad, the authorities only need to enhance their support. If it is limited, however, they are forced first of all to acquire the backing of various social/professional/ethnic groups so as to be able to consolidate their power from these bases in the future. This is the case of the PDPA before and after 1978. Being mostly of an urban and intellectual character, it lacked popularity in the countryside: “The communist leaders have always been conscious of the fact that they have been creating a revolution by proxy, faced with a nebulous working class and an apathetic peasantry”.⁶ That is why, shortly after the army-led Saur Revolution in April 1978, the DRA government tried by all means to win the peasants’ support and launched a land reform (hereafter: the ’79 LR; Decree No. 8)⁷:

Question [by – MMK] Polish News Agency correspondent: What are your immediate and foremost responsibilities in the arena of social and economic policy?

⁵ A. Kampka, *Retoryka jako manifestacja i uprawomocnienie władzy* [in:] *Między znaczeniem a działaniem. Retoryka i władza*, ed. A. Kampka, Warszawa 2012, pp. 19ff.

⁶ O. Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge 1986, p. 84.

⁷ The Dari text of Decree no. 8 was published in the *Urdu Majalle* (no. 681, 1978, pp. 17–21) and the Pashto in the *Ata Inqilābi* (1979, pp. 99–141). The text has never been translated into English, and only an Italian translation exists (G. Vercellin, *Afghanistan 1973–1978: dalla Repubblica Presidenziale alla Repubblica Democratica*, Venezia 1979, pp. 107–14).



Answer [by N.-M. – MMK]: **We want land reforms in its real sense.** (...)

Question Polish News Agency correspondent: Do you have a specific land reform program for Afghanistan.

Answer: **Yes, we have**, but the study of the technical aspects of this program requires time, and then it will be implemented. We had not studied the technical aspects of this program before but now we shall carry out this study.⁸

Though the easiest way to gain someone's trust is to speak in their own language, the PDPA had created its own tongue that was largely unfamiliar to most of their (il)literate compatriots.⁹ Unlike the majority of the elites in the Islamic world who, confronting the need for modernisation, remained loyal to their religion, its ideas, values and language, this small group of leftists praised communist achievements. That said one may ask if they really understood the principles of Marxism-Leninism. One should keep in mind H. Enayat's words, while reading this article:

The breakdown of the cultural integration of traditional society was thus reflected in a linguistic rift, which has been one of the chief obstacles to a coherent, sustained and fruitful debate among Muslims of all classes and ages over their social and political problems.¹⁰

H. Enayat's "rift" is not only of linguistic character. It is also of a pictorial nature as it involves a Barthes-esque "image" too. In this project we are more

⁸ *Text of the Press Conference of Noor Mohammad Taraki, Secretary General of People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, Chairman of the Revolutionary Council of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan with Afghan and Foreign Journalists*, s.l., s.d., p. 6. The Dari version: *Konferāns va mosāhebehā-ye matbu'āti-ye Nur-Mohammad Taraki monshi-ye omumi-ye Hezbe Demokrātik-e Khalq-e Afqānestān, ra'is-e Shurā-ye Enqelābi va sadrā'azam-e Jomhuri-ye Demokrātik-e Afqānestān bā ruznāmenegārān-e khāreji-vo dākheli*, s.l., s.d., pp. 13–14.

⁹ In the Part 2. the PDPA's language was characterised as "unknown (consequently, unintelligible)" but here the adjective "unfamiliar" is preferred as some Afghans had access to Dari/Pashto programmes broadcast from the USSR. In the collection of the Afghan Archive at the Institute of Oriental Studies (Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland) there is a green nicely printed leaflet in Dari about a radio programme dedicated to the citizens of Afghanistan (as well as Iran) and broadcast from Tashkent (No 1220).

¹⁰ H. Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, Austin 1982, p. 3.



interested in the pictures represented by the posters than in the language itself, although we assume that both phenomena cannot be separated.¹¹ In anticipation, one should highlight the fact that the the '79 LR designed as “a sudden break with the past”¹² was accompanied by the elimination of illiteracy because in the opinion of the PDPA theoreticians only “agrarian freedom” and “enlightenment” would give the DRA government the strong and unequivocal support of the countryside.¹³

2 *Bildkultur*

As in the *Preliminary Report* and *Part 2.*, we need to continue our discussion on the *Bildkultur* (culture of picture / pictorial culture). It is an expression adapted from R. Siebertz's book on 20th-century Iranian postage stamps *Die Briefmarken Irans als Mittel der Politischen Bildpropaganda*¹⁴ and re-applied here to describe an open-access, culturally-constructed semantic system made up of pictorial signs used for mass (re-)creation, (re-)transfer and (re-)storage of common memory on the same (or similar) terms as high or popular Afghan poetry.¹⁵ In neither of the previous texts we have developed this issue more extensively; hence, its two crucial features – open access and being culturally-constructed – need to be more detailed here.

¹¹ The PDPA language was analysed by E. Bayer (E. Bayer, *Tendenzen der Entwicklung des gesellschaftspolitischen Wortschatzes der Demokratischen Volkspartei Afghanistans (DVPA) in schriftlichen Dokumenten für den Zeitraum 1965-1986: eine Untersuchung sprachlichen Wandels in den Sprachen Dari und Pashto*, Berlin 1988; E. Bayer, *Sprachlicher Wandel als Ergebnis politisch motivierter Sprachlenkung: neuere Entwicklungen im Pashto Afghanistans*, [in:] B. G. Fragner et al. (ed.), *Proceedings of the Second European Conference of Iranian Studies held in Bamberg, 30th September to 4th October 1991, by the Societas Iranologica Europaea*, Rome 1995, pp. 53–63).

¹² O. Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge 1986, p. 85. F. Fukuyama wrote: “Many on the Left shared the view that a radical socialist regime in the Third World could legitimate itself, even in the absence of free elections and open discussion, by engaging in land reform, providing free health care, and raising literacy levels” (E. Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man*, New York-Toronto 1992, p. 10).

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ R. Siebertz, *Die Briefmarken Irans als Mittel der Politischen Bildpropaganda*, Wien 2005.

¹⁵ J. Darmesteter, *Chants populaires des Afghans*, Paris 1888–1890; G. F. Girs, *Istorieskie pesni puštunov*, Moskva 1984.; J. Caron, *Reading the Power of Printed Orality in Afghanistan: Popular Pashto Literature as Historical Evidence and Public Intervention*, “Journal of Social History” (Fall 2011) 45(1): 172–94.



Open access means that there are no restrictions on access to information. Since any information is coded pictorially there is no need for a script that would exclude the illiterate from the typographic culture based on printed texts. If in a typographic culture even basic knowledge of the alphabet is essential for de-coding any message, those who are unable to read or write remain outside the main circulation of information. In this sense, the *Bildkultur* is reserved for both the literate and the illiterate and makes no distinction between either social category.

Being culturally-constructed means that to decipher a pictorially coded message requires prior cultural knowledge. We refer here to R. Barthes's words: "The variation in readings is not (...) anarchic; it depends on the different kinds of knowledge – practical, national, cultural, aesthetic – invested in the image and these can be classified, brought into a typology."¹⁶ Since a picture can be compared to a sign, it is important for both sides – the author and the addressee – to use the same set of symbols. How can someone become acquainted with such a set? This is never taught directly or at once but can be isolated by an individual in the process of enculturation – i.e. "the process by which people learn the dynamics of their surrounding culture and acquire values and norms appropriate or necessary in that culture and worldviews".¹⁷ In the case of religion, a set of signs is to be found in religious teaching, common beliefs and everyday practices. Such religion-based knowledge means that an illiterate peasant would recognise the name Muhammad written on, for instance, a truck. In the case of politics, it is transferred by local authorities, representatives of the central government, politicians, ideological programmes found in the press, broadcast on the radio, etc. It is due to such politics-based knowledge that an illiterate adult would identify the picture of the king/president and recognise him as the representative of the entire nation. To make his messages more comprehensible, an author ought to use the signs that belong to high or popular culture. Frequently used symbols make a message clearer and an unambiguous message means that the signs are used more frequently. An author is allowed, of course, to bring in new signs but they always run the risk of their message not being communicable enough, or at least, of it taking more time to reach the addressee who needs additional time to recognise (and interpret) the meaning of new signs.

¹⁶ R. Barthes in his article *Rhetoric of the Image*, [in:] Barthes R., *Image – Music – Text*, trans. S. Heath, New York 1977, p. 46.

¹⁷ J. E. Grusec, P. D. Hastings, *Handbook of Socialization: Theory and Research*, London 2016, p. 547.



Accepting J. J. Elias's assertion that "an image or object that is mass produced out of cheap materials has greater societal relevance than an expensive item of limited circulation",¹⁸ we should emphasise that the *Bildkultur* is represented by, *inter alia*, cinema posters, religious pictures, naïve paintings on trucks, in tea-houses, school books and bills, flyers, hoardings, photography or television rather than by miniatures that "speak to and for the same audience as do texts".¹⁹

In *Part 2* we presented a single example of the Afghan *Bildkultur* – a mural photographed by P. Centlivres and M. Centlivres-Demont in 1990 in Kabul. This time we would like to present another example – a painting on a truck photographed in the 1970s. The picture represents a general feature of the *Bildkultur* – i.e. mass (re-)transfer and (re-)storage of common knowledge and/or expertise, as the *Bildkultur* can play a significant role in (in)formal (self-)education processes.

Similarly to Pakistani or Indian truck drivers, Afghans richly adorn their vehicles too.²⁰ Inspiration for colourful drawings are European postcards or film posters but they also include religious elements – e.g. Muhammad's fantastic winged horse al-Burāq that took him from Mecca to Jerusalem.²¹

As J.-C. Blanc writes, the tradition of decorating trucks stems from the older custom of adorning animals travelling with a caravan. "[R]ibbon, tassels fringes and an array of good-luck charms"²² were used to pay homage to animals. They were also used as amulets that, by repelling evil and inauspiciousness, were supposed to protect caravans during their journeys. The magical-religious nature of decorations is still present today in the form of the tableaux. But, J.-C. Blanc adds also that "[t]hese images help to bridge the gap between nature and progress. They perform the role of a basic alphabet of modern times, by which the peasant can come to know the machinery

¹⁸ J. J. Elias, *Aisha's Cushion. Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam*, London 2012, p. 18.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 17. On illustrations accompanying manuscripts see: F. Mehran, *The Break-line Verse: The Link between Text and Image in the "First Small" Shahnama* [in:] Melville Ch. (ed.), *Shahnama Studies I*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 151–70.

²⁰ One of two questions formulated at the end of *Part 2*. was "[c]an one speak about Iranian and Pakistani influences with regard to usage of the picture as a means of communication, or not?" Apparently, yes. Especially since India has a long and active pictorial tradition. On India see: K. Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*, Durham-London 2007; S. Ramaswamy (ed.), *Beyond Appearances? Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India*, New Delhi-Thousand Oaks-London 2003.

²¹ I. R. Netton, *A Popular Dictionary of Islam*, London 1992, p. 59.

²² J.-C. Blanc, *Afghan Trucks*, New York 1976, p. no number.





Figure 1

and landscapes of Europe, and take a closer examination of the aeroplane that crosses the sky above his valley".²³ His conclusion regarding the usefulness of truck paintings is not limited to the magical-religious sphere of Islam but also including education must be taken into account while discussing the non-aesthetic values of figurative art.

3 Study

As in the *Preliminary Report* and *Part 2*, the core element of the paper is a single socialist realistic poster published in a Moscow-printed album *Afganistan, revolucya prodolzhayecya* (*Afghanistan, the revolution continues*). So far the matter of our concern was the Saur Revolution and the leadership of the PDPA. This time we would like to deal with a poster dedicated to the '79 LR started officially in January 1979 and completed in June of the same year, but in fact never implemented in full as during 1980s some basic changes of its programme were introduced, referred to officially as the second phase.

Following R. Barthes's methodology to be found in his article *Rhetoric of the Image*, one can study this poster on three levels: (1) as a linguistic message (2) as a coded iconic one, and finally (3) a non-coded iconic one.²⁴

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ R. Barthes in his article *Rhetoric of the Image*, [in:] Barthes R., *Image – Music – Text*, trans. S. Heath, New York 1977, p. 32–51.

The first kind of message, of linguistic substance, appears on the poster twice – as a Dari exclamation: *Doulat-e J[omhuri-ye] D[emukrātik-e] A[fqā- nestān] melkiyat-e dehqānān va sāyer-e zamindārān-rā motābeq be ehkām-e qānun mohtaram shomorde va tazmin mi-konad* “The government of the DRA respects and guarantees the property of the peasants and other landowners in accordance with the provisions of the law” and as a Pashto title on a white booklet *Də zmāki də milkiyat rasmi sanad* “official land tenure certificate.” Although R. Barthes writes that the linguistic message appears before the two others, one might dispute this assumption by raising the issue of illiterate addressees. To decipher the code of the message incorporated into the poster, one ought to possess two sorts of skills – knowledge of the script and a command of the Dari/Pashto language. In the case of the illiterate, a command of language cannot be used to decode the message unless the message is verbalised by someone else. If no-one can verbalise it, this part remains mute and must be expressed by pictorial elements as the Bildkultur is of open access. This means that there is a slight variation in reading the posters, because a literate person first caches the text while moving his attention towards the graphic, yet an illiterate ignores the text, focusing on the picture only. Following R. Barthes, one may well ask, “What is the signifying structure of «illustration»? Does the image duplicate certain information given in the text by a phenomenon of redundancy or does the text add some fresh information to the image?”²⁵ As we will see, the information coded by the analysed slogan and picture are not identical. They do not replace themselves but instead complement each other.

The linguistic message to be found in the afore-mentioned exclamation can be consolidated into two closely related messages – denoted and connoted. This means that the noun *melkiyat* “property” does not only substitute “a thing or things that are owned by somebody,”²⁶ but sub-/semi-/unconsciously refers to general ideas about possession expressed by Islamic law.²⁷ One of the more serious mistakes made by the DRA government was

²⁵ R. Barthes in his article *Rhetoric of the Image*, [in:] Barthes R., *Image – Music – Text*, trans. S. Heath, New York 1977, p. 38.

²⁶ *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, Oxford 2000. p. 1058.

²⁷ S. Habachy, *Property, Right, and Contract in Muslim Law*, “Columbia Law Review” 1962, 62(2), pp. 450ff.





Figure 2

a harsh violation of the time- and religion-honoured property right. The second significant element of the exclamation are the nouns *dehqānān* “peasants” and *zamindārān* “landlords.” The first denotes a regular peasant (Dr *dehqān*, Ps *bazgar*), a smallholder (Dr *dehqān-e kam-zamīn*, Ps *lāz-zmāki bazgar*), a “nolandholder” (Dr *dehqān-e bi-zamīn*, Ps *bi-zmāki bazgar*)²⁸ as

²⁸ The neologism “nolandholder” refers to those peasants who have no land to work on and

well as a farm worker (Dr *kārgar-e zirā'ati*, Ps *zirā'ati kārgar*). The latter refers apparently to those who, before the '79 LR, had been the owners of large estates and served the first group as, *inter alia*, creditors within the *gerau* mortgage system and beneficiaries within the *sud* usury one. In the aggressive propaganda of the first two years after 1978 the *dehqānān* were recognised as an underprivileged social group while the *zamindārān* as an exploitative one.²⁹

Two more linguistic elements that should be mentioned here are *qānun* "law" and *tazmin* "guarantee." The first word raises the question of the nature of the legislative system. Is the right of property guaranteed by traditional Islamic law or by a modern non-Islamic one?: how do both systems comply with each other? The second one raises the question of the nature of the guarantee. What are the peasants and landowners protected from? Considering the total misunderstanding of the nature of the Afghan countryside, serious mistakes made at the beginning of the '79 LR, when landlords were humiliated in public and arbitrarily deprived of their property, and finally the fact that those who received expropriated land became the object of attacks from former owners, one can assume that the analysed poster was designed to change growing popular outrage at this public policy. In fact, the DRA state did not secure the new law against the dissatisfaction of those who lost the most, and "[g]iven the strong tradition of land ownership recognized by Islam, expropriation was anathema to many leading religious figures and peasants also risked religious opprobrium by farming redistributed land".³⁰

The second and third kind of the message, of iconic substance, appears in the form of a peasant of unknown age who looks ahead rather than at us, holding his land tenure and land-use rights certificate in his right hand. On a white booklet decorated with the emblem of the DRA one can read the official name of the republic and *Də ʒmāki də milkiyat rasmi sanad* "official land tenure certificate," but even those who were illiterate, with an eye on current political developments as well as on the activity of the local authorities that represented the ideological programme of the PDPA, should have easily understood what kind of document this was. Among different articles published by the *Haqiqat-e Enqelāb-e Saur* (*Truth of the April Revolu-*

need to lease it.

²⁹ O. Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge 1986, p. 85

³⁰ F. L. Pryor, *The Red and the Green. The Rise and Fall of Collectivized Agriculture in Marxist Regimes*, Princeton 1992, p. 94-95.



tion; hereafter *HES*) – an official press organ of the Central Committee of the PDPA – one can find a small black-and-white photograph taken during an official ceremony when the land tenure certificates were distributed among peasants of the Faryāb province. Four peasants, speaking, maybe joking, present their documents to the reader. The atmosphere captured by the photographer seems to be peaceful, eventually they became landowners. All the same, our attention is drawn to the fact that none of the four peasants is looking straight at the camera. Unlike the peasant in the poster, everyone is looking away.



Figure 3: *HES* 01.12.1362AP / 19.02.1984, no. 753, p. 2. According to the text 125,000 noland- and smallholders living in the Faryāb province received their land tenure certificates during the second phase of the land reform.³¹

The peasant clutches a sickle to his breast with his left hand. The choice of tool cannot be accidental and the sickle should be understood not only as a “tool with a curved blade and a short handle, used for cutting grass or corn”,³² or “an agricultural implement similar in form and use to a reaping-hook, but properly distinguished from this by having a serrated cutting-edge”³³ but

³¹ The *HES* published from time to time enthusiastic articles on the land reform, e.g.: *Hamrāh bā dehqānān* [Together with the Peasants], “*HES*” 03.05.1364AP / 24.07.1985, no. 1186, p. 1–2; *Bā bāvar-e bozorg be āyande* [With Great Belief in the Future], “*HES*” 03.05.1364AP / 24.07.1985, no. 1186, p. 1; *Mālekin-e asli-ye zamin* [The Main Landowners], “*HES*” 22.07.1364AP / 14.10.1985, no. 1250, p. 1–2. Some of them were supplemented by photographs, but, keeping in mind the military situation in Afghanistan, we cannot be sure that those photographs were not actually fabricated.

³² *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, Oxford 2000. p. 1242.

³³ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. XV, Oxford 1989, p. 415.

first and foremost as a symbol of agronomic activities. On the postage stamp presented below and issued in 1984 on the occasion of the *Də bazgar wra3* “Day of the Peasant” one can see a peasant folding a sheaf and a sickle:



Figure 4: The collection of seven postage stamps was issued on 21 March 1984, i.e. on the Afghan New Year (Dr *Nawruz*) celebrated also as the Day of the Peasant (see R. Jack, *Afghanistan 1973-2014. A Specialised Catalogue*, s.l. 2014, p. 30) Other single postage stamps and series dedicated to the festival were issued in 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985 and 1989 respectively (ibidem, p. 14, 17, 19, 22, 25, 30, 34, 58 [private collection]).

The sickle as a symbol of agronomic activities, agriculture, or the countryside in general, appears also in the title of a socialist-realist novel by A. Habib *Dāshā va dasthā* (*Sickles and Hands*) about Rahim – an ambitious youth who voluntarily enlists in the DRA army to fight against counter-revolutionaries, to educate people about the new Marxism-Leninism as well as to help peasants in their, *inter alia*, agricultural work.³⁴ In some other works by A. Habib like the poem *Dehqān* (*Peasant*) a sickle held by a farmer facing straight ahead even transforms into a semi-magical instrument.³⁵ Finally, on one of the illustrations accompanying a series of articles published in the *HES* in 1981 on the 18th anniversary of the establishing of the PDPA, we can distinguish three social groups of workers, soldiers and peasants by

³⁴ A. Habib, *Dāshā va dasthā*, Kābol 1362AP/1983, pp. 67–68.

³⁵ A. Habib, *Dehqān*, [in:] A. Habib, *Khatt-e sorkh*, Kābol 1362AP/1983, p. 66.

a hammer, a rifle and just a sickle respectively.³⁶ A question thus arises as to whether this conventional usage of the three tools as emblems was an Afghan concept or, most probably, if they had been adapted from the Soviet set of propaganda symbols.³⁷

Analysing the meaning of the sickle, it is worth referring to R. Barthes's words that "(...) we are here dealing with a normal system whose signs are drawn from a cultural code (...). What gives this system its originality is that the number of readings of the same lexical unit or *lexia* (of the same image) varies according to individuals".³⁸ His assertions allow us to claim that the peasant's simple tool corresponds with a more modern and more technically complicated machine like a tractor crossing the field somewhere behind the main character and pulling a loaded trailer. This basic visual element suggests that tradition and modernity can co-exist next to each other but let it not delude us for it is modernity alone that shapes the future and not tradition. Articles on the mechanisation of Afghan agriculture and photographs showing modern agronomic tools metaphorically called *ālāt-e asri* – "modern instruments" – were quite frequently printed in the *HES*:³⁹

³⁶ M. M. Kłagisz, *Visual Propaganda in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan – Part 2. Leading Role of the Party*, "The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture. New Series" 2017, no. 5(1), p. 81.

³⁷ See a similar issue raised in the *Part 2.* and a discussion on a mural photographed by P. Centlivres and M. Centlivres-Demont in October 1990 in Kabul. It shows a girl who symbolises the homeland and the Kabul-based government, although in the common Afghan imagination the homeland is perceived as masculine rather than feminine (70–72). On the other hand, one can find such articles as the *Az mādar-vatan defā' mi-konim* [*We defend our motherland*] ("HES" 15.05.1363AP / 05.08.1984, no. 893, p. 1), where the fatherland is in fact a motherland.

³⁸ R. Barthes in his article *Rhetoric of the Image*, [in:] Barthes R., *Image – Music – Text*, trans. S. Heath, New York 1977, p. 46.

³⁹ Cf. "HES" 10.04.1366AP / 01.06.1987, no. 1804, p. 2 short information on chemical fertilisers available to every potential user. "HES" 15.09.1367AP / 05.12.1988, no. 2234, p. 3 short information on mechanisation of farming. "HES" 13.07.1362AP / 05.10.1983, no. 637, p. 3 short information on positive aspects of mechanisation of farming in the DDR. "HES" 12.08.1362AP / 03.11.1983, no. 661, p. 3 short information on new tractors delivered by the USSR and a group of Soviet agrarian advisers that came to Afghanistan. "HES" 18.08.1363AP / 07.05.1984, no. 820, p. 1. short information on agricultural machines centres equipped by the DRA government. *Māshinhā dar zerā't* [*Machines in agriculture*], "HES" 30.03.1363AP / 19.06.1984, no. 856, p. 1. *Dar tākestānhā-ye porbār* [*In vineyards full of fruit*], "HES" 04.01.1364AP / 24.03.1985, no. 1084, p. 1–2. "HES" 22.03.1364AP / 12.06.1985, no. 1152, p. 2 on Afghan peasants learning how to drive tractors. *Dastāvardhā va niyāzhā-ye dehqānān-e Kondoz* [*Achievements and needs of the peasants of Kunduz*], "HES" 04.08.1364AP / 26.10.1985, no. 1260, p. 4.





Figure 5: *HES* 24.08.1360AP / 15.11.1981, no. 185 p. 2. The photograph is accompanied by information that Afghan peasants, frequently referred to in the press as *dehqānān-e zahmatkesh* “toiling farmers,” used to till the land with the sweat of their brows using simple tools only. It was only the Saur Revolution that made technological improvements in the countryside more accessible to them.

To transform reality into Socialism, as E. Dobrenko would say,⁴⁰ a graphic designer needed to use local elements familiar to the addressee.⁴¹ This is why the peasant’s outfit is characteristic of rural areas and consists of a long green shirt, a red vest and a white turban. Contrary to the peasant completely

“HES” 10.04.1365AP / 01.07.1986, no. 1469, p. 3 on peasants producing more due to the PDPA support.

⁴⁰ Dobrenko E., *Socrealisticheskiy realizm i realnyy sotsyalizm (Soveckiy estetika i kritika i proizvodstvo realnosti)*, “Colloquia” 2007, no. 180, p. 91.

⁴¹ Such techniques are not just the domain of socialist realism. Already Amanullah Khan wore during meetings with peasants a country outfit (L. B. Poullada, *Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan, 1919–1929*, Ithaca-London 1973, p. 79). The choice of graphic elements/outfit has a specific psychological effect – it creates (or it should create) a connection between the content and the recipient of the content.

dressed in white, found on the postage stamp presented above, the colours of his shirt and vest refer to the colours of the flag of the DRA. This cannot be a coincidence since on the other “Day of the Peasant” postage stamps issued in 1984, all the male characters wear long white shirts and white, red or blue vests. Neither can this be a question of graphic composition or aesthetics alone. The choice of the colours can refer to the ideologically postulated unity of the peasants and the DRA government:

It should be recalled that in the current situation establishing the integration of peasant groups, establishing of integration of the workers and the peasants, and deepening the process of joining the revolution by the peasants is one of the urgent needs that lies behind a series of plans and revolutionary measures.⁴²

The fact that the peasant holds up his land certificate to make it clearly visible is of great significance here. He seems to be explaining to us, or even shouting, that his success and prosperity represented by wheat or the tractor results from the land tenure as well as land-use rights, are guaranteed by the official authorities. This indirectly expressed statement can be even understood more generally as the success and prosperity of all the country and is only achievable when the peasants become full owners of their tilled fields. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that on the postage stamp below, issued in 1981, we can see a group of farmers holding a slogan *Zamin māl-e kasi-st ke bālā-ye ān kār mi-konad* “The land belongs to those who till it”.

The aforementioned slogan is obviously a simplification of the programme of the PDPA, but it quite often appears in different memories, *inter alia*, by A. Misāq (1937–2016) – a writer, leftist politician, minister of finance (1978–9), mayor of Kabul (1980s):⁴³

Perhaps in the history of Afghanistan, these are unique decrees. (...) that the land reform was such that everyone who worked above the ground would be on his land.⁴⁴

⁴² *Dar rah-e edame-ye eslahat-e demurkarik-e arzi*, “HES” 03.06.1360AP / 25.08.1981, no. 151, p. 1.

⁴³ L. W. Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan*, Metuchen-London 1991, p. 160.

⁴⁴ A. Arqandāvi, *Khāterehā va tahlilhā. Tārikh-e mokhtasar-e Afqānestā nar navad sāl-e akhir*, s.l. 1377AP, p. 155. Cf. L. Dupree, *Towards Representative Government in Afghanistan. Part II: Steps Six Trough Nine – and Beyond?*, “AUFS. American Universities Field Staff. Reports” 1978, no. 14, pp. 3–4.





Figure 6: The postage stamp issued on 21 March 1980 (R. Jack, *Afghanistan...*, p. 17) Here one can see peasants receiving their land tenure certificates delivered by three representatives of the central government. The ceremony is changing into a political manifestation expressed by the slogan *Eslāhāt-e arzi-ye demokrātik feodālizm-rā rishekan sākht* “Democratic land reform eradicated feudalism” as well as into a festival of joy as some peasants dance after apparently receiving their certificates while another play the drums. The small, regular fields in the background suggest that the reform is fair and equal. (private collection)

However, does such a statement not undermine the property right, which, as we can read on the poster, is respected and guaranteed by the DRA government?

4 (Pseudo-)Reality of the Land Reform

The reality depicted on the analysed poster, selected postage stamps as well as in a few newspaper articles looks very bright. Full of enthusiasm and grateful to the DRA government, the peasants work hard for the greater good. Considering the nature of socialist realism which is always accompanied by the acceptance of an artificially constructed and idealised (pseudo-)reality the poster tries to convince us that others have already accepted its message and we are the last not to do so.⁴⁵

A close examination of Decree No. 8 reveals that some of its points had been adapted from the ineffective land reform started by M.-D. Khan (1973–78) a few years before:

⁴⁵ W. Tomasik, *Okolice socrealizmu. Prawie tuzin szkiców*, Bydgoszcz 2009, p. 40–41.

Ascertaining the limit of property, elimination of unjust relationships between the farmer and the land owner, and agricultural worker, improvement in conditions of poor farmers with small holdings, and distribution of land to the deserving and landless people, absorption of more active population in the agricultural sector, so far as the capacity of this sector allows, expansion of agricultural extension and research programmes for greater effectiveness of the agricultural sector, ensuring the right of landownership to those who really work on the land, putting greater emphasis on cooperative systems and ultimately raising overall production levels.⁴⁶

The PDPA adapted the words of the former finance minister S. Abdullah (1973–8) about “elimination of unjust relationship between the farmer and the land owner, and agricultural worker” or “ensuring the right of landownership to those who really work on the land”, giving them a more radical tone in terms of the “elimination of feudal and pre-feudal conditions from the social and economic structures of the country” as we can read in Decree No. 8 and in terms of the slogan “the land belongs to those who till it” as we can read on one of the postage stamps. But, in reference to the ’79 LR one aspect ought to be emphasised, the DRA government did not intend to suppress private property and only a small percentage of land was reserved for agricultural cooperatives and state-owned farms. Notwithstanding, the reform itself was supposed to change both the social character of the Afghan countryside as well as to re-shape its ineffective economy based on poor husbandry. Decree No. 6 officially ended the *gerau* mortgage system, while Decree no. 8 officially repealed the complex socio-economic system dominating the Afghan countryside referred to in DRA propaganda as feudalism.⁴⁷ Additionally, it expanded and strengthened the relationship between the peasants and the rest of society, and finally increased production efficiency:

(2) popularizing, strengthening and deepening the union of the working class and peasant classes, in order to strengthen as much as possible the unity of the people of Afghanistan in the

⁴⁶ *Land Reforms in Afghanistan*, “Aryana. Afghanistan Republic. Special Issue”, Summer 1975, p. 24.

⁴⁷ O. Roy presents a short but incisive critique of the land reform in his *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge 1986, pp. 86–92).



struggle for the construction of a society without antagonistic classes and free from any kind of exploitation of man by man;

(3) increase in the volume of agricultural production, in order to provide the people with quantitatively adequate foodstuffs, as well as raw materials suitable for agricultural export and for the indispensable development of the country.⁴⁸

The fact that the socio-economic structure of the Afghan countryside preserved the complex feudal system dramatically degenerated its productivity. As M. S. Noorzoy writes “[i]n Afghanistan no large-scale substitution of capital has occurred for labor-intensive methods on the farm, and labor productivity has remained relatively stagnant”.⁴⁹ Among the various factors shaping the ineffectiveness of the Afghan peasants enumerated by experts are: (1) the limited size of arable land (ca. 12%); (2) the uneven geographical distribution of arable land; (3) the small average size of farm holdings (ca. 3.5 ha); (4) inefficient land tenure; (5) lack of modern irrigation techniques; (6) the limited use of chemical fertilizer, thereby constraining land yield; (7) the predominance of an autarkic structure and barter/counter trade; and (8) limited private investment due to the lack of capital and high costs of borrowing in the private capital market.⁵⁰ Noland- and smallholders had no access to state financial support and were dependant on the *gerau* mortgage system:

Either because the land does not belong to himself, or because of his insecurity he shows no special interest in boosting productivity although with greater production on the area put under his tillage there will also be a relative rise in his share. But this share is in no way comparable to the profit that will accrue to the landowner.⁵¹

Smallholders or those who lease land through lack of ownership, entangled in an expanded system of economic dependencies, did not invest in new technologies or cultivation techniques that would raise the quality, productivity and yield of their work. Following D. Acemoglu and J. A. Robinson’s

⁴⁸ Decree no. 8.

⁴⁹ M. S. Noorzoy, *Alternative Economic Systems for Afghanistan*, “International Journal Middle East Studies” 15, 1983, p. 27.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 27–28.

⁵¹ *Land Reforms in Afghanistan*, “Aryana. Afghanistan Republic. Special Issue”, Summer 1975, p. 24.



statement expressed in their book *Why Nations Fail*, we can say that Afghan peasants had been dominated by extractive economic and political institutions “which concentrate power in the hands of a few, who will then have incentives to maintain and develop extractive economic institutions for their benefit and use the resources they obtain to cement their hold on political power”.⁵² Such institutions in no way contributed to raising the economic level of agricultural production. Surprisingly, despite the fact that agriculture was the main source of income and employment in Afghanistan after the Second World War, an appropriate perspective on the critical role of agriculture in the Afghan economy was lacking and “a long-run commitment was not maintained to push for a more rapid development of agriculture and allocate resources to this sector commensurate with the capacity of the sector to generate output”.⁵³

The '79 LR, in their haste, was unacceptable to the majority in the countryside. The would-be Marxist-Leninist reformers projected detailed rules to change the structure of ownership as well as the distribution of water, thereby guaranteeing rights to groups thus far limited, but at the cost of the landlords.⁵⁴ However, to carry out the land reform that was economically necessary, well-trained officials should have been delegated to the countryside, especially since, as F. L. Pryor writes, the Afghan government tried to implement land reform twice before 1979 but always with poor results mostly because of the complex land tenure structure resulting from extensive relations between tenants and landlords. The landlords guaranteed the tenants access to water or basic loans in return for their rents. They also represented them in contacts with the central government because of the weak centralisation of Afghan administration. It was a landlord who would take care of a peasant's interests in relations with the state and *vice versa*. L. Tabibi states that “in order to carry out an agrarian reform efficiently, these features of socio-political structures in the countryside must not be forgotten”.⁵⁵ Mean-

⁵² D. Acemoglu, J. A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail. The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, New York 2012, p. 471.

⁵³ M. S. Noorzoy, Alternative Economic Systems for Afghanistan, *International Journal Middle East Studies* 15, 1983, p. 26.

⁵⁴ According to the official data that should be treated with caution before 1978 ca. 1/3 of peasants owned no land at all. Among those who owned 39% had no more than 1 ha, 32% no more than 2 ha, 17% no more than 4 ha, 7% no more than 10 ha and only 5% no more than 100 ha (H.-J. Radde, E. Dummer, *Revolutionäres Afghanistan*, Berlin 1980, p. 77).

⁵⁵ L. Tabibi, *Die afghanische Landreform von 1979: Ihre Vorgeschichte und Konsequenz*, Berlin 1981, p. 64.



while there were problems just at the initial stage of the '79 LR because the DRA government did not have enough people to carry out such a basic task. Most of the leftists lived in cities and had limited knowledge regarding the social-economic relations between tenants and landlords. One can say that they boiled those relations down to mere feudalism – a key word present in most official speeches and slogans. Ideologically-based purges in the administration meant that the DRA authorities expelled many experienced officials who, due to their age, education or connections, could have supported the reform.⁵⁶ Additionally, partisan struggles between the Khalq and the Parcham PDPA factions reduced the operational capabilities of the government. As F. L. Pryor writes, "(...) the government decided to implement the reforms with relatively fewer cadre (...). These cadre, moreover, spent only a brief time in each village and, therefore, did not attempt to organize the village in permanent self-governing structures to aid in the implementation of the reform or to sustain the reform after they left".⁵⁷ Even if at the beginning of the '79 LR about 80% of the peasants who possessed less than 20 *jerib* (ca. 2000 m²) accepted the changes, soon they had many reasons whereby they approached reform with some reserve.⁵⁸ In areas where there was little cultivated land, they were moved to other places, often inhabited by other ethnic groups.

F. Ahmed blamed the DRA government's lack of understanding of the basic problems of the Afghan countryside.⁵⁹ However, one might ask whether the breakdown of traditional structures of political dependence was not more important for the PDPA. Instead of traditional complex dependency, a new social model was forced as *jāme'-ye novin* (new society) based on the principles of equality and brotherhood. These noble, in principle, goals also had a deeper meaning – the PDPA wanted to crush social relations only to replace current political leaders, landowners, clergymen, the community or tribal leaders. Such a political manoeuvre would help it to replace past extractive economic institutions with new ones organised by and ancillary to the PDPA. How can one be sure about this? First of all, extractive economic institutions do not respect property rights while ownership and a natural need for others and public institutions to recognize one's own rights is one of the

⁵⁶ F. L. Pryor, *The Red and the Green. The Rise and Fall of Collectivized Agriculture in Marxist Regimes*, Princeton 1992, p. 93.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

⁵⁸ O. Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge 1986, pp. 86.

⁵⁹ F. Ahmed, J. Paul, *The Khalq Failed to Comprehend the Contradictions of the Rural Sector. Interview with Feroz Ahmend*, "MERIP Reports" 1980, no. 89, pp. 13–20.



key factors ensuring the success of any reform. In various memories about the first months of communist rule, property rights violation is a constantly theme. That is why on the analysed poster two words *qānun* “law” and *tazmin* “guarantee” appear in the slogan. And this is also why this poster represents an artificially constructed and idealised socialist-realist (pseudo-)reality.

Simplifications, neglect and ignorance of a number of social-economic characteristics and contradictions of the countryside at the beginning of the '79 LR meant that agricultural production decreased. Socialist propaganda very often missed the truth, emphasising constant economic growth and turning a blind eye to economic failures. No wonder *Afghanistan Today* announced proudly:

To boost agricultural products, peasants in Afghanistan make enormous use of modern agricultural machinery⁶⁰

and completed its utterance with a colourful picture of red combine harvesters standing in line.⁶¹

5 Conclusions

As in both previous texts, one question arises: does the observer understand the message conveyed by the (non)iconic elements of the poster? Or maybe such a composition transcends readability due to its socialist-realistic nature. To stay in power, the authorities must use phraseology that is clear for the audience so the form of persuasion should be constructed collectively by manipulative practitioners. Those who are aware of Marxist-Leninist ideology can more or less read the poster presented above. Those who are not, will not read it properly just as in the case of L. Wittgenstein’s language-games indicating that each action can be understood only because the participants in the game have prior knowledge of its rules. To learn the rules one needs to be constantly surrounded by the object in the same way that persuasion is more effective than compulsion. In the case of Afghanistan, access to such ideological posters, press or poetry was limited by the civil war to major cities. Consequently, the DRA government was not able to broaden its social basis and to build its social base necessary for political activities. Various

⁶⁰ Solaiman, *New Socio-Economic Plan*, *Afghanistan Today* no. 2 (March-April), 1990, p. 21.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.



actions taken by the DRA government after ideological-political changes in 1980 proved to be insufficient. Not only did land reform fail in general but the results turned out to be the opposite of its intended goals.

All the observations presented above are intended to simulate further, more complex research on the subject and will, hopefully, allow two unresolved questions to be answered. To the two questions presented in *Part 2*, I would add one more:

(3) Did the DRA government's failure result only from non-propaganda factors as, *inter alia*, the attitude of the communist authorities to particular social groups, or should issues such as the selection of techniques or means of communication also be taken into account?

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