

Matthias Weinreich: “We Are Here to Stay”—Pashtun Migrants in the Northern Areas of Pakistan

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I highly recommend Matthias Weinreich’s incisive book on the entrepreneurial migrations and settlements of *Pashto*-speaking peoples or Pashtuns from Western Pakistan, Afghanistan and other regions to the Northern Areas of Pakistan since the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-1990s. Arguably, it constitutes the first ‘comprehensive’ treatment of “Pashtun migration in the Northern Areas” (p. 7), and thus, a single-case study has been necessary to “fill this gap” in empirical knowledge (p. 7). Weinreich’s findings can contribute to an increased insight about migrant behaviour. Yet—and that is my only major criticism—Weinreich has not put his research in any comparative or theoretical context.

Numerically, the presence of Pashtuns or ‘Pathans’ in the Northern Areas—since 2009, known as the autonomous province of Gilgit-Baltistan¹—is still quite small; Weinreich estimates that, in the mid-1990s, they constitute just below 1 % of the region’s 600,000 inhabitants (pp. 13, 19) (though much higher estimates exist of 900,000 people or more). Nevertheless, their impact as entrepreneurs in trade, craftsmanship and other professions is disproportionate to their numbers, helped by the fact that they—as entrepreneurs—are concentrated in the cities and towns of that province.

The main findings presented in this book, and in the preceding German language publications in the journal *Iran and the Caucasus* (Brill) in 2001 and 2005 (see references), are based on field research that Weinreich has conducted between 1993 and 1997 in the four districts of the Northern Areas. These districts include the greater part of the Karakoram mountain range: Gilgit, Ghizer, Diamer, Skardu and Ganche (a part of eastern Diamer became a separate district called Astor in 2004). Weinreich, an accomplished anthropologist and currently stationed in Armenias for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), has unearthed the life histories of Pashtun migrants and (other) local inhabitants, through informal, unstructured interviews mostly conducted in Pashto or through an interpreter in *Urdu*, the official Hindi language of Pakistan, and in *Shina*, a Dardic language. Even though fluent in Pashto, Weinreich had

¹Source: (Associated Press of Pakistan (APP), ‘Cabinet approves ‘Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order 2009’, 29 August 2009, http://www.app.com.pk/en/_index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=85033&Itemid=2).

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to spend considerable time and effort through “repeated meetings and an open exchange of thoughts” (p. 10) to gain the trust of prospective respondents. One hurdle that he, like other (male) researchers, was unable to overcome is the prohibition in Pashtun society for women to interact with “men not belonging to their family” (p. 11). Thus, all his 60 respondents in the linguistic part of his research, 30 temporary and 30 permanent migrants, were male.

Weinreich focuses on three aspects in the migrant’s life histories: the original reasons of the respondents or their forefathers to migrate and settle in Northern Pakistan or ‘Karakoram’; the trades and professions the migrants undertook to survive, earn a living, and gain status or at least a firm footing in their new homeland; and the degrees to which they learnt or were willing to speak (one or more of) the local languages as opposed to maintaining a (full) mastery of their mother tongue, Pashto.

Weinreich first sketches the gradually increasing movements of Pashtuns into the largely mountainous north of Pakistan over the last 150 years, which generally show a shift “from seasonal presence to permanent migration” (p. 31). The Northern Areas are host to mainly Shina-, *Khowar*-, *Balti*- and *Burushaski*-speaking communities, though more than ten different languages and, thus, ethno-linguistic groups can be distinguished, while most of them master (more or less) Urdu. These communities had and still have cross-cutting affiliations to Sunni, Shi’i (Ismailis, Twelver Shi’ites, etc.) and Sufi (Nurbakhshis, etc.) schools of Islam. In contrast, the Pashtuns were and are mainly followers of the Sunni school of Hanafi Islam, given that, together with the pre-Islamic and tribal martialist, Pashtun code(s) of honour (*Pashtunwali*) partially accounts for the recurrent, often violent tensions with the other communities. This leads Weinreich to conclude that in the “mid 1990s local attitudes towards Pashtun migrants were slowly but surely changing from critical to hostile” (p. 109).

Even so, the migrating Pashtuns did not only bring concepts and ideas that might be considered reactionary, conservative or tribal, i.e. ‘pre-modern’. Thus, one of the biggest increases of Pashtun *temporary* migration into Northern Pakistan took place after the opening of the Karakoram Highway in 1978. The new highway made it less paramount to settle down, as it “reduced travel time and cost to such an extent, that even the poorest and busiest of entrepreneurs could...visit his family [in his homeland] at least once a year” (p. 103). Consequently, the *permanent* migration of Pashtuns into the Northern Areas was stalled or even reversed—partially accounting for the fact that they still constitute less than 1 % of the region’s population.

On the very first page of his book, Weinreich links the Pashtun readiness to work in “all conceivable professions and trades” to “economically motivated migration of Pashto speakers from their original areas of settlement” to the Karakoram region of Pakistan (p. 6). Poverty and interrelated political strife and instability did compel many Pashtuns to seasonally migrate and eventually settle in Karakoram. However, blood revenge (*badal*) and other sociocultural reasons related to the *Pashtunwali* honour codes seem to be equally important motivations of migration, certainly in the initial stage. The later stages of earning a living, learning or teaching a trade and, thereby, amassing wealth were often a migrant’s way “to settle his blood dues at home” (p. 39). These reasons frequently resurface in the life story accounts of Weinreich’s interviewees, when the latter speak of themselves, their fathers, other family members or their forefathers. Seventy-year-old Muhammad Isa (in an interview in mid-1990s) said, “My grandfather and his brother came to this place [Tarishing village, upper Astor

Valley, in southern Diamer] about 90 years ago. They were originally from Swat [a valley and district in Pakistan's *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa* or North-West Frontier Province], where they had killed two men from the local Khan's clan in a land dispute. Then they had fled the valley in fear of revenge" (p. 34). Seventy-five-year-old Abdul Latif, in Chatorkhand village, lower Ishkoman Valley, in northern Ghizer said: "Our father came from Swat. His family was closely related to the Wali, the local ruler there. One day my father had a [violent] dispute with the Wali's brother about some land which had earlier been promised to our family....My father and his people killed some of the Wali's men. The ruler took away all my father's land and swore revenge.....The English invited my father to Gilgit, promising him land and protection" (p. 37). Thus, many of the Pashtun settler's forebears were "outlaws, who had fled their homelands in fear of revenge" (p. 38). Weinreich gives many more examples of blood feuds accounting for the initial flight of Pashtuns to Northern Pakistan: someone's father once "killed a man in a fight and, afraid that the slain man's relatives would seek revenge, he fled to Mansehra" and eventually moved to Gilgit (p. 51); two brothers "originated in Swat, from where they had fled in fear of blood revenge to the Tangir Valley [in western Diamer] in the 1950s" (p. 74); and so on and so forth.

In an astounding number of cases, the original impetus of Pashtun migration seems to have been a flight from one's homeland due to a blood feud, often arising out of a land dispute. This reminds me of equivalent blood feuds amongst the Chechens and Albanians, as described in my 'How-to-Feud-and-Rebel' series currently being published in the journal *Iran and the Caucasus*. Actually, the great anthropologist Louis Dupree not only speaks about the tribal martialism of the Pashtuns, the largest ethno-linguistic group in Afghanistan, but also of that of Afghanistan's Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, and other ethno-linguistic groups: all "Afghan groups with which I am familiar look on themselves as bold warriors, and their folklore reflects this attitude" (1997, p. 119). Nevertheless, he suggests that Pashtunwali codes of "honor and hospitality, hostility and ambush" (1997, p. 127) constitute the predominant "codes of the hills" (1997, p. 126): the "values of the Pushtun and of the Muslim religion, modified by local custom, permeate in varying degrees all Afghan ethnic groups" (1997, p. 127). Arguably, the same can be said of the Pashtun honour codes amongst the non-Pashtun groups in Pakistan.

Weinreich does not seem to fully grasp from his own observations the crucial relevance of the interrelations between Pashtun blood feuds and migration patterns, even though he repeatedly refers to the "blood revenge refugees" (p. 103) in the concluding part of his book. Nor does he link the Pashtun honour codes with entrepreneurial practices. Weinreich should be forgiven the aforementioned limitations in his analysis, as these do not appear to derive from a lack of knowledge or insight on Pashtun honour codes (far from it). Rather, his focus simply lies elsewhere: on the socio-economic dynamics of Pashtun entrepreneurship and on the linguistic dynamics of conducting business, communicating amongst themselves and with non-Pashtuns while settling down amongst them. Weinreich notes the "remarkable continuity in the use of Pashto within the family" (p. 90); even in many mixed marriages, children spoke some Pashto. Moreover, mastery of Pashto increased the status if not popularity of well-off Pashtuns amongst the 'native' communities (while it decreased the status of poor Pashtuns); they could afford the expensive education of Pashto as well (pp. 100-101).

Weinreich's findings on the motivations, professions and languages of Pashtun migrants in Northern Pakistan are intriguing. Yet, he himself does not compare these

aspects with those of other migrants in other parts of the world. That is a natural limitation of any single-case study, and as shown before, Weinreich has had good reasons to refrain from conducting a comparative multi-case study. Still, Weinreich's could have referred to other research on Pashtun and non-Pashtun migrations to put his own research in clearer context. Scholars versed in (im)migration studies might detect (dis)similarities with other diasporas and migrating communities within states. Yet, the average reader might find it difficult to assess the relevance of Weinreich's empirical findings, and the degrees in which Pashtun migrants behave typically or atypically compared to other migrants. Are these Pashtuns unique, or do they behave as any migrant in a new environment?

Finally, one may consider Weinreich's study to be somewhat outdated, given the fact that his findings are primarily based on field research he carried out in the 1990s. Many things have changed in Pakistan and the entire Middle East since then, not just the renaming and reconfiguring of the Northern Areas as Gilgit-Baltistan. The political and intercommunal tensions within Pakistan have worsened considerably since then, fuelled by the repercussions from the terrorist attack by *Al-Qaeda* (in Arabic) ('the base'), on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC on 11 September 2001. Numerous Pashtuns still constitute or support the currently resurgent *Taliban* (in Pashto) ('student') movement that had ruled (most of) Afghanistan since 1996 and was dislodged by an American-led intervention in October 2001 as the Taliban gave hospitality to *Al-Qaeda*.

Nevertheless, Weinreich has been able to do some fieldwork, like collecting 80 Taliban chants or chant items recorded on nine audio cassettes in Khurram Agency within the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan in 2005 (Pelevin and Weinreich 2012, pp. 51–52, footnote 7). This research concerns a rather sensitive topic, but the risks, apparently, were manageable because his stay was so short and his contacts were reliable. Probably, Weinreich has had no practical opportunity, or considers the dangers too great, to undertake a lengthy follow-up field trip in the former Northern Areas of Pakistan. Still, I hope that he and any collaborators could conduct such research on Pashtun migrants in the foreseeable future and, at least, reinterview some of the original respondents of Weinreich's research in that region in the 1990s.

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