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HOMO ITINERANS

La planète des Afghans

*Alessandro Monsutti, 2018. Paris: Presses universitaires de France,
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“I am from where I go”. An old Afghan farmer made this apparently paradoxical statement to the Swiss anthropologist Alessandro Monsutti during his fieldwork in Afghanistan. The author of *Homo itinerans, La planète des Afghans*, is intimate with the country, not only through his various travels in the area since the 1990s, but also thanks to his knowledge of *Dari* (Persian), one of the country’s local languages.

Between an evocative travel diary and a fine-grained ethnography, this text provides the reader with a complex and nuanced depiction of various mobility patterns: on the one hand “forced” ones, regarding Afghans fleeing a context of civil violence and insecurity, and on the other hand “voluntary” ones when it comes to international political, military and humanitarian actors. However, Monsutti places the issue of mobility above these dichotomies, in a much broader global polity favouring social inequalities and exclusion.

The central thread of the book revolves around the analysis of these various mobility patterns, defined by the author as “itinerancies”. These mobilities depict Afghan “refugees” moving to escape violence, looking for better socio-economic opportunities, multiplying political affiliations to manage unsafe settings and developing coping strategies to fulfil their families’ needs. Furthermore, Monsutti considers his own “itinerancies” as an anthropologist, going back and forth to the country. The final “itinerancies” he is also interested in are the mobility patterns of the humanitarian “experts” deployed in Afghanistan, after having been to other war-torn settings such as Congo, Palestine or East Timor. The ethnographer focuses on these “entangled mobilities” (p. 12), the encounter between fighters and humanitarian actors, between ‘refugees’, villagers and transnational bureaucrats.

Throughout this study, the author attempts to tackle the following questions: How do people flee their war-torn country? What are the different steps of their migration trajectories? How do they get jobs and administrative documents such as passports, identity cards and residence permits while on the move and far from their country? What kind of socio-cultural resources and coping strategies do Afghan refugees use to recreate social links and economic networks that have been shattered by war and exile? (p. 16).

All the chapters are based on ethnographic vignettes where the author portrays the daily life of the different actors he has met during more than two decades of empirical work in Afghanistan. The first ethnographic vignette addresses the perception of the USA military actors after their intervention following the 9/11 attacks. It recalls the encounters of the

author with various national and international military and humanitarian actors. These various narratives allow the author to highlight the “post-war reconstruction” dominant narrative of the international community. The author also writes about US embedded anthropologists who since 2001 have been hired by the US army to understand local populations’ expectations and needs. These anthropologists involved in military and humanitarian operations tend not to have any critical distance towards their action and lack a reflexive posture (p. 33). The American Anthropological Association denounced their activities, stating that they violated their academic responsibility, jeopardized the security of social scientists and provoked accusations suggesting that they “weaponized” the discipline.

The second chapter concentrates on the micro-politics of the frail Afghan State. It explores the political evolution and power games through the three presidential elections that took place in 2004, 2009 and 2014. Monsutti outlines the discourses held by humanitarian experts, who were convinced that the presidential elections would constitute a “new start for the society and the State” (p. 44). In parallel to these reflections, he is interested in his own reflexivity asking himself what ‘to do’ with his knowledge of the Afghan refugees and villagers’ everyday life experiences regarding this normative vision of political and social change. He examines the paradoxes and contractions of the various political elections and eventually denounces the increasing corruption within the Afghan administration as well as the “perverse effects of the international presence in Afghanistan” (p. 69) in order to highlight the failure of the country’s post-war reconstruction and the Afghan local and national political elites’ strong hold on the financial resources brought by the international community.

In chapters three, four and five, the author pursues his ethnography of the local actors in the Afghan crisis and puts into perspective his position as both anthropologist and international consultant. Indeed, based on his experience of having, with two other colleagues, trained some Afghans at the Geneva Graduate Institute and in Abu Dhabi, he highlights the tensions and inconstancies between the members of this elite’s desire for a State and their concrete experience of daily life state-making, dominated by unachieved actions (p. 79). He argues that even rural development programs that are supposed to regenerate the country’s agricultural system have turned into political tools serving the power games of Afghan political elites.

The following three chapters concentrate on the new patterns of forced migration that Afghans have adopted since the 2000s. At the start of the Afghan conflict in 1980, Afghan refugees mainly found security and shelter in Iran and Pakistan. However, in the 2000s, because of the shifting geopolitics of the Middle East, Afghan refugees became less welcomed in the two above-mentioned neighbouring countries. As a result, they had to broaden their mobility patterns by moving to Europe, the USA, Australia and New Zealand. These displacements are not only an answer to the violence and insecurity that people flee but are also strategies of socio-economic diversifications and a way to shape transnational networks and to maintain social links with their home country (p. 161).

Chapter nine explores once again the interwoven “itinerancies” between the researcher and his researcher partners. During a family visit in Friuli in the north-eastern part of Italy, Monsutti met some young Afghans and Pakistani refugees close to a fountain by chance.

This unexpected encounter highlights the intertwined “itinerancies” of the author coming to rest in this village, whereas for the young “refugees” this place embodies a provisional shelter.

If Europe represents a source of hope for a better life for most of these young Afghan refugees, they have to face socio-economic vulnerability, hardship and indifference (p. 184). In describing and analysing their mobility patterns, Monsutti deconstructs the concepts of “refugees” and “migrants” and regards these young Afghans as “witnesses of the world in which we live, a world characterized by growing inequalities, a global landscape of exclusion in which we evolve, but that we pretend not to see” (p. 205). Indeed, they are political actors, who display through their “itinerancies” the social inequalities of the current world order.

In the final chapter, the ethnographer proceeds to a global assessment of both his empirical work and the current political landscape in Afghanistan. In line with postcolonial academic literature, he conceives the country as a “space of contested modernities” (p. 210), where large parts of the population do not necessarily share the way in which their future is imagined by international and relief development institutions. Indeed, the multiple “itinerancies” highlighted in this book simultaneously reflect the power relations of the contemporary world in all its brutality as well as unexpected expressions of its social vitality (p. 211).

This book is a fine example of itinerant anthropology that studies the case of a country disrupted by war and forced displacement where various conceptions of social life and political projects oppose each other. It provides an innovative way of doing ethnography that renews the study of forced migration and displacement. However, the issue of gender is completely absent in *Homo itinerans*. The analysis focuses exclusively on male migration without reflecting this specific pattern of transnational mobility. This is indeed surprising, as women – in Afghanistan and abroad – perform a key role; in the transformation of society, in transnational networks, and in economic strategies developed by Afghan refugees. Despite this blind spot, the book is – based on thorough and detailed ethnography – a great example of an anthropological analysis that connects local and global dynamics and relates them to the study of forced migration and displacement.