Introduction

> Yet on we went, changing countries oftener than shoes,
> Through class wars despairing,
> When there was only injustice and no outrage.
>
> —Bertolt Brecht, 'An die Nachgeborenen' (1939)

'I come from where I am going!' the old man said to me in the course of conversation. At the time, I paid little attention to the paradox. Perhaps it was simply his answer to one of the questions I had posed as a conscientious ethnographer: we were walking along a road towards Bamyan, in the highlands of central Afghanistan, and I had asked him where he was from originally. Later, however, his enigmatic smile often came back to me. The twinkle of benevolent irony in his eyes, the chunk of bread and cup of tepid tea from his thermos that he shared without thinking during a pause had eventually convinced me that the statement had a deeper significance.

It was the summer of 1996. As part of my doctoral research, I was criss-crossing the Hazarajat in central Afghanistan to gather material about interregional migration. I had just parted from a rather garrulous travelling companion, who claimed to have fought heroically against the Red Army, but was now yelling persistently about the stones that cut into his feet. After a gruelling trip on a truck and a night on the floor of one of the roadside inns dotted around Afghanistan, I was glad to be able to walk in silent enjoyment of the countryside. For the first time, I was approaching the famous Valley of the Buddhas, which would be destroyed a few years later by the Taliban. Yet it came as a pleasure when I began chatting with the old man who had appeared from nowhere. His blue turban indicated that he had performed the Shia pilgrimage to Karbala in Iraq, where he would have engaged in silent prayer at the shrine of Husayn ibn Ali, the Imam murdered in 680 CE by troops of the Umayyad Caliph. Rubber slippers over bare feet, a faded parka and a simple bundle thrown over

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one shoulder completed the character. 'I come from where I am going!' Perhaps it was a quote from one of the mystic poets that even uneducated peasants know so well. Every creature is destined to return by one path or another to their creator. We are defined not by the place where we were born, but by the road we are taking. Life as actuality, life as a journey. Isn't *Homo afghanicus* first of all a *Homo itinerans*, who moves about to escape violence or to seek better economic opportunities, who builds up political affiliations to cope with a situation of insecurity, who switches between activities as circumstances demand in order to provide for the needs of his family? Spatial mobility, political fluidity, socioeconomic plasticity: these will be the central themes in the following pages.

The image of Afghanistan that I want to convey differs sharply from that of an enclave suspended outside the historicity of its neighbouring regions, a land on the fringes that, though certainly magnificent, remains stubbornly resistant to change. The territory of today's Afghanistan has not been intellectually and economically turned in on itself, escaping the political developments of the modern age. It is an outward-looking space, an arena where the great political ideologies of the past two hundred years have repeatedly met and clashed. Having crystallized in the late nineteenth century as a buffer state between the Russian and British Empires, within frontiers that have scarcely changed since then, it was one of the very few countries in the Islamic world to preserve a large degree of independence, serving as a reference for Muslims in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent engaged in the struggle against colonial rule. It was directly affected by communism, but was also one of the main birthplaces of radical political Islam. Since the intervention in 2001 by a US-led coalition, it has been one of the largest recipients of international aid and a target for massive promotion of the neoliberal model of peace.

Homo itinerans, then, takes more than one form: some flee the violence and try to reach Europe, Australia or North America; others move from country to country, driven by crises and associated job opportunities. But if Afghan society has been durably marked by war and exodus, it also displays the impact of a host of international agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The outflow of refugees is matched by the inflow of experts, who, fresh from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Palestine or East Timor, come to exercise their talents in Afghanistan. This mobility too, involving encounters between combatants and aid workers, villagers and transnational bureaucrats, will be addressed in what follows. But such movement across borders does not occur in a horizontal world. Various forms of itinerancy, expressing global inequalities and power relations, take shape around Afghanistan. Experts relocate from north to south, while asylum seekers travel from south to north; the for-

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mer promote supposedly universal social and political norms, while the latter, through their mobility, expose the unequal distribution of such resources as economic wellbeing or the possibility of a secure existence.

My own Afghan journey began in 1993, as a university student, when I joined a research team in Pakistan headed by Pierre and Micheline Centlivres, two anthropologists who had devoted part of their careers to Afghanistan. Coming as I did from a family with its own history of migration, I had defined myself from childhood with reference to a number of different places and soon became sensitive to the notion of 'circulation territories'[1] developed by Afghans. Those who practise, read or hear about anthropology tend to think of it as the study of localized social groups, but my early research on transnational networks led me to place myself outside this perspective. For in the regional context that interested me, it was difficult to speak of an organic link between society and territory. My aim from the outset was to show that Afghan refugees remained actors in their own destiny, capable, despite the war, of developing strategies based on the mobility and dispersion of family groups.

In a series of periods in the field, I also became aware of the major impact that humanitarian action had on the lives of the people among whom I was developing. Afghan reality, I saw, could not be approached in the way I had been taught in ethnographic methodology courses. To be sure, I was still marked by what might be called classical aspects: apprenticeship in a particular language (the Dari Persian spoken in Afghanistan); attention to kinship, whether through descent or marriage; the collection of life stories illustrating wider social phenomena; and the centrality of participant observation (not without a degree of fetishization). But in studying Afghan society, I conducted my work at a variety of sites, constantly changing the scale and never singling out just one level of observation or analysis: to reconstruct what was happening in a hamlet in the Hazarajat highlands, I spent time on Tehran building sites, attended weddings in New York and went to barbecues in Adelaide; to understand life in refugee camps in Pakistan and the ways in which people there were repatriated to their country of origin, I visited the offices of ministries and international organizations, in Kabul as well as Geneva. The whole point was to position myself 'off centre', epistemologically and ethically, so that I could better understand the core of the contemporary world (Agier 2016a, 2016b).

My research did not concentrate on a community with a clearly defined territory. I let myself be guided by relations that developed over time, in order to bring out the strategies of people who agreed to answer my questions and received me at their home or workplace. I tried to share their everyday existence, investing more energy in observation than in the

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asking of questions. Gradually I managed to reconstitute their most ordinary social links, the hidden logics behind their constant movement and the dispersion of kinship groups, the forms of solidarity that escaped all determinism. The construction of knowledge relies on personal involvement, and the need to maintain intellectual distance does not exclude all affective closeness.

In the mid-1990s, the task of following certain individuals with whom I was developing closer relations led me to move between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. Then, as their circulation territory grew larger, my research sites diversified to take in Europe, North America and Australia. I did my best to retrace the spatial scales perceived and utilized by the social players, whether refugees or aid workers, Afghans or Italians. For me, therefore, 'the local' and 'the global' were not preconceived spheres or reference frameworks. Nor did my interest in movement and flows imply indifference to what distant places meant to my interlocutors. My ethnographic work used a procedural approach that placed global dynamics at the heart of the everyday interactive situations I described, observed and analysed. Every place was read as global, while globality was seen as rooted in particular contexts.

How did the people in question move around? What were the stages of their migratory journeys? Where did they stay en route? Whom did they approach when they wanted to obtain a job, a residence permit, a visa, an identity card or a passport? How did they go about sending money or goods from one country to another? How did they remain in contact with others despite the unsophisticated technologies at their disposal? What kinds of solidarity could they rely upon? Through these questions, I hoped to elicit the sociocultural resources that my interlocutors mobilized and the strategies they deployed in response to the disruptive impact of war and exile.

My itinerant research work on migratory phenomena was disturbed by the attacks of September 2001 in New York and Washington DC, which suddenly brought Afghanistan back to the centre of the international stage after a decade of oblivion. The US-led military intervention and the fall of the Taliban regime at the end of 2001 brought about spectacular changes. The democratization process driven by the international community led to the holding of several *loya jirga* or Grand Assemblies (June 2002, September 2003–January 2004 and June 2010), then to presidential elections (October 2004, August 2009 and April and June 2014) and legislative elections (September 2005 and September 2010).[2] Dozens, eventually hundreds of organizations arrived in Afghanistan in the wake of the military. Thousands of aid workers and experts in development and the promotion of democracy set up shop in Kabul, in high-security offices rented at great expense. It is this post-2001 period that will be primarily considered in these pages.

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A new era began for Afghanistan – one initially marked by a wave of optimism. According to the dominant discourse, Afghans were weary after twenty-five years of war, destruction and forced resettlement; their main aspiration was for peace and social justice. More than a rapid reconstruction of the country's infrastructure, Afghans had to be given the means to articulate their rejection of violence. It is true that some roads, schools and clinics were built, but it would take years for every district in the capital, Kabul, to be connected to the electricity grid; a (northwestern) section of the road circling the central highlands to link up the country's main cities is still waiting to be asphalted. The main effort went into educating Afghans in peace by means of workshops on the promotion of democracy, human rights and women's emancipation.

Like many other researchers, I took part – rather circumspectly – in this postconflict reconstruction industry. I did consultancy work for various structures, particularly the Kabul-based Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. They were exciting years, which brought me to work closely with a small unit of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees: the Afghanistan Comprehensive Solution Unit (ACSU). Our aim was to show that the movement of Afghans between their place of origin and neighbouring countries could play a positive role in the postconflict process of stabilization, and that it was necessary to think beyond the usual schema involving three and only three solutions to the refugee problem (repatriation to the country of origin, integration into the initial host country and resettlement in a third country). The people at the head of the ACSU wanted to help in modernizing the international refugee protection regime, while for my part I also aimed to question the state-centred model of migration. My motivation was twofold: as an ethnographer, I wanted to use the opportunity to understand the international system better by playing an active part in it; as a citizen, I hoped to pass on a different way of looking at mobility and to question the idea that sedentariness was the normal state of social life.

Although I could not claim to be in the front row, I was able to observe on the spot how aid work and development projects were transforming society. I noted, for example, how the Afghan vocabulary was being enriched with all sorts of English expressions (or Persian translations thereof) from the doxa of development: *kâr-e grupi* (literally 'working group'), *hoquq-e bashar* ('human rights'), *jâm'a-ye madani* ('civil society'), *enkeshâf-e dehât* ('rural development') and so on. Body techniques – which Marcel Mauss and Norbert Elias have taught us to regard as social phenomena of prime importance – were also being modified, whether through the mixing of men and women in the offices of international organizations, the increasing use of chairs in public places or the evolution of dress codes among government personnel.

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Yet, after an early period of hope and a number of formal successes, the situation in Afghanistan took another turn for the worse. From 2005, an anti-government uprising began to gain ground. International experts denounced the negligence and corruption of central government, the rampant criminality, and the sharp rise in the production and trafficking of drugs. Obsessed with the question 'What went wrong?', the same experts considered that insurgency successes were the corollary of reconstruction failures. However, they found it difficult to question the paradigm guiding their activity.

Like many Afghans, I wondered whether the political compromises marking the presidential election in 2014 had sounded the death knell for the democratization process and, more generally, for the hopes of integrating Afghanistan into the international system. The failure of the international reconstruction effort cannot be explained only in terms of mistakes or the complexities of the Afghan context. The country illustrates, in a particularly painful manner, various political, economic and social processes present elsewhere in Asia, Africa and Latin America, but also in Europe: violence, migration, militarization of daily life, deregulation of markets, and overlapping sovereignty between state and non-state players. In contrast to the age of Bertolt Brecht, people today do not talk of class struggle, but rather of the rule of law, the promotion of democracy or the emancipation of women. But the political situation demonstrates that a far from negligible section of the Afghan population is not convinced by this panacea that international experts haul around from one crisis-ridden country to another. One segment – less numerous but still quite significant – has even joined a violent rebellion against what they see as an unjust political, social and cultural order, expressing a rejection also to be found in the Middle East and Asia, Africa and Latin America, whose very terms remain difficult to grasp.

There is no choice but to recognize that our world is one of growing inequality – notwithstanding the pious wishes of the UN Millennium Development Goals – and that the disparities are becoming increasingly visible. Economic growth benefits the richest, while the rest of world society, particularly the poorest fringes but also the middle classes, experience a stagnation or degradation of their living conditions. Each year, Oxfam publishes a report on the world economy. Since 2015, the most affluent 1% of the world's population has owned more wealth than the rest of humanity. And in 2016, according to the estimates of this venerable British NGO, eight persons alone possessed the same wealth as the poorest half of the world (Oxfam 2017).[3]

Faced with these dizzying figures, I cannot help wondering whether the Taliban (and also Islamic State) represent a kind of revolt against ever-growing inequalities, the grimacing face of a global class struggle that

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we must learn to understand in its sociological and political dimensions. In this optic, Afghanistan appears less as a country torn apart by endless conflict than as one of the places where opposition to the UN's normative model of social life and political organization (which proved incapable of really slashing disparities) has found its sharpest expression. It may be comprehended as a laboratory of globalization, a place where the global hegemonic project became bogged down.

Fernand Braudel thought that to dwell on events, great battles and royal biographies was to remain on the surface of history. Rather, he underlined the importance of incidental facts and routine events for an understanding of long-range structural changes. Thus, mobility – more than political analysis of conflict – became for me the obligatory key to understanding the multiple realities that are woven in and around Afghanistan. All the chapters in this volume are constructed around little ethnographic vignettes. In a series of impressionist brush strokes presenting scenes of life that I observed among Hazarajat villagers or at a party of expatriates in Kabul, I evoke various places and people to convey particular atmospheres so that the reader can see, hear and feel what everyday life is like for the people I met in the course of two decades of empirical work. Some wear a turban, others a tie; some brandish a rocket-launcher, others a folder stuffed with receipts…

Resisting any inclination to exoticism or value judgements, I treated all these individuals as having an equally legitimate place in the multiterritorial social and political logics, the intersecting itinerancies that were of interest to me in my work. Loyalty and emotion in the relations I established with them were a methodological tool, a process of discovery that gave significance to little facts gleaned almost by chance that make up human lives, whether Afghan, French or Persian. My aim was to highlight one of the greatest riches of the ethnographic approach in comparison with an abstract normative attitude to what society and the state should be. Therefore, the goal of the present work is to cast an unconventional gaze on Afghan society that grasps it in its transnational dimension, while at the same time reflecting on the very practice of ethnography and how to give an account of it in writing.

Notes

1. A term I borrow from Alain Tarrius (1995, 2002).
2. The legislative elections scheduled for 2015 were postponed several times and finally took place in October 2018.
3. See also Nederveen Pieterse (2002).

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