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Of Connections and Flows: Homo Afghanicus is Homo Itinerans

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Homo Itinerans:
Towards a Global Ethnography of Afghanistan

By Alessandro Monsutti

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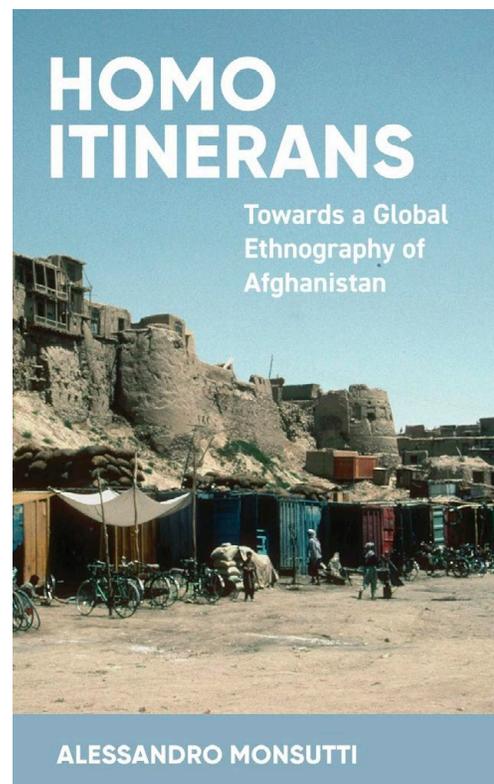
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“To each his own phobias, to each his own dreams” (94). Reflecting poetically on the simultaneous journeys of his own and those of the plethora of Afghan “mobile persons” (65) he had met in different parts of the world, including Afghanistan, the objective of Alessandro Monsutti’s book is simple yet powerful. In his own words, it is an attempt to “cast an unconventional gaze” (7) on Afghanistan that positions it as integral to and not outside of globality and transnational networks and flows.

As an “outward-looking space” (2), Afghanistan to Monsutti is placed not just at the intersection of (competing) global forces but is a site that is perfectly positioned to reveal the shortcomings of the so-called emancipating ideologies. Far from being an intractable and incorrigible space of both colonial and contemporary chroniclers (8-18), the networks and flows that pierce through Afghanistan are a potent reminder



of its inherently transnational character. Simultaneously, a study of its people’s itinerancies, as Monsutti shows, can help inform and reform academic approaches and policies that continue to see this country as a graveyard of empires. In fact, by focusing on flights, flows, and other forms of mobilities practised by Afghans, the author makes sure to position the “incidental facts and routine events” (7) of the people to understand the “long-range

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structural changes” (7) and their absences thereof. Thus, instead of presenting a top-down assessment of Afghanistan, *Homo Itinerans* departs from the conventionally available narratives by looking at the “spatial mobility, political fluidity and socio-economic plasticity” (2) of Afghans. And in so doing, Monsutti seeks to show how the “imposed universalism that inspires re-construction effort of Afghanistan” (113) is not only replete with inequalities but that it might very well be “immoral” (101).

Divided over ten short but informative chapters, *Homo Itinerans* presents insights partly drawn from Monsutti’s (auto)ethnographical vignettes of his experience as a researcher, academic and instructor both in and on Afghanistan. It comes as no surprise then that the book is loaded with self-reflexive content and discussions on positionalities, which can be of interest to post-colonial scholars of geography, in general, and border studies, in particular. These aspects, in fact, come across most effectively when Monsutti discusses how his presence in gatherings as a Persian-speaking “engrizi” (more generally a white European, 60) creates differential impacts. From helping him navigate heavily guarded compounds run by westerners to becoming a trophy acquaintance for his Afghan patrons, Monsutti demonstrates an acute awareness of his complicity in enacting, reinforcing and challenging the “power relations that take shape around Afghanistan” (2).

For that matter, Monsutti’s reflections on the performance of internationally funded projects and programs like the Provincial Reconstruction Teams and Community Development Councils stand in contrast to the international narratives generally peddled about them. Much to the discomfort of the transnational liberal elite, which is particularly peeved at the persistent failure of Afghanistan to transform itself into a viable state (6), Monsutti suggests that the donor-funded projects have themselves contributed to the further fragmentation of Afghanistan (27). As an “archipelago of sovereignties” (28), the lack of coincidence between state, territory and population in Afghanistan’s case does not so much betray its shortcomings as a nation-state but the inviability of reproducing the Westphalian template in post-colonial contexts (37). Simultaneously, these so-called failures mirror the experiences of the Global North, where the rise of overlapping sovereignties between state and non-state players is for all to see (6).

Conjecturally then, it is possible to argue that borders, which are ostensibly meant to separate ‘us’ from the ‘rest’, cease to be sites embodying differences. Instead, to recall Heidegger, borders manifest themselves like horizons—that “from which something begins its

presenting” (in Lems 2018, 13). Here Monsutti could have added an interdisciplinary touch to his work by alluding to concepts of relationality of space and throwntogetherness advanced by scholars of geography like Doreen Massey (2005). After all, it is at/through/against/with borders that Afghanistan finds itself amid global structures and flows. Hence, it would have only been consistent with Monsutti’s larger ethnographic arguments to mobilise the aforementioned ideas to show that borders are not simply (and erroneously) the agents of incarceration. On the contrary, they are that which open Afghanistan in to(towards) the world.

Having proposed that movements hold the key to re-imagining Afghanistan as a transnational space, Monsutti then goes on to suggest that the migration of Afghans to different parts of the world must also be seen as more than a mere reaction to negative push factors like internal conflicts and wars. In fact, he asserts that “Afghans are not powerless victims of events beyond their knowledge; they derive a certain advantage from their geographical dispersion and adopt different forms of mobility” (64). As such, their migration out of Afghanistan ought to be understood variously: it is at once a mitigation strategy (65); a rite of passage for young men (most often) into adulthood (108), and a way to diversify sources of livelihood and alliances (78). In more than one way then, the out-migration from Afghanistan, which was the highest in the world at one point in time, is more than a “strategic response to insecurity” (64).

Seen comprehensively, Afghanistan, to Monsutti, is not a static place on the face of a given political map. But, as he shows, this country has found itself made and unmade by concurrent, overlapping and connecting networks, which are commercial, humanitarian, migratory, and armed in their character (107). Contributing in their unique ways, all these networks and their corresponding flows play a role in determining the rhythms of power relations in and about Afghanistan. Placed within these assemblages, which make up what we know as globalization (111), the study of Afghanistan then must be seen as a venture within the field of global ethnography where issues jump scales, development is transnational, and politics is never entirely left to Afghans alone.

Work Cited

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