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Beyond the boundaries

A methodological perspective on Afghan migratory networks in Western countries

Alessandro Monsutti

From one field to another

In a previous research, I explored the socio-economic and migratory strategies of the Hazaras (a predominantly Shiite population from an area called Hazarajat, corresponding to central Afghanistan), in the context of a war that has lasted for more than twenty-five years and has provoked the exile of millions of refugees (Monsutti 2005). During fieldwork carried out since 1993, I have focused on Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries, Pakistan and Iran. My current research project extends the geographical scope of my work to Western countries, which are increasingly attracting Afghan migrants, in order to produce an overall picture of their transnational strategies¹.

The Hazaras have woven very efficient trade and migratory networks based on kinship and neighbourhood ties. With members often scattered in many places, extended families have maintained a strong cohesion. I followed the networks of my informants from their village of origin in Afghanistan (I have mainly worked with people from the district of Jaghori, province of Ghazni) to Quetta (Pakistan) and then to Iran (especially Tehran and Qom). Each place has its advantages and drawbacks. In Iran (especially in the big cities), it is easy to find a job, but almost impossible to settle on a long-term basis; on the other hand, in Quetta, the Hazaras

can move freely, but the professional activities available to them are scarce; finally, in Hazarajat, they have their family land and homes, but the social and economic prospects are gloomy. Despite the trauma of war and exile, Hazaras have managed to benefit from their geographic dispersion and the resulting economic diversification by developing new transnational cooperation structures.

My main hypotheses are that the very concept of «refugee» does not allow accounting for the strategies developed by Afghan migrants; in war and exile, the size of the groups of efficient solidarity will be reduced but will gain in transnational extension; these transnational networks result from positive and explicit choices, and are fuelled by globalised transportation, financial exchange and information systems.

In a first stage, I spent the summer of 2004 in Afghanistan in order to reactivate my previous contacts among the Hazaras. There, I was able to get the addresses or phone numbers of many people, some of whom I had already met in the past. In a second step, I will contact and possibly visit them during 2005 in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand.

¹ The research project described in this paper is funded by the MacArthur Foundation, Chicago.

² I have assessed this sometimes contradictory literature (Monsutti 2004: 27-54).

A brief review of the field

A recent and growing body of literature proposes a novel approach to migration and mobility linking it to transnationalism and globalisation². Several scholars have applied the concept of transnational social networks to the study of specific migrant and refugee groups (for instance Al-Ali *et al.* 2001; Chatelard 2002; Ma Mung 1992; Rouse 1991; Shami 1996; Tarrus 2001). Without negating the specificity of refugees in legal terms or minimising the hardships they face, these authors borrow methodological and theoretical concepts developed mainly for the study of labour migration. This approach stems from the concern that we see refugees not mere as victims but as people adapting to the world system, using their social and cultural resource. Refugees and other types of migrants share a number of social features, individuals may belong to several categories at a time or successively, and migratory circuits are often multidirectional.

This new trend is also influencing research on Afghan refugees. While a number of texts have been published on the Afghan diaspora settled in Western countries (Centlivres / Centlivres-Demont 2000; Centlivres / Centlivres-Demont / Gehrig 2000; Edwards 1994; Omidian 1994; Omidian / Lipson 1992; Shalinsky 1996), the networks existing between distant locales and scattered people have not yet been thoroughly studied. The migratory trajectories of Afghans are not definitive or linear. It would be more accurate to describe them as a series of multidirectional displacements. This phenomenon is not limited to Hazaras; it has become an encompassing aspect of the Afghan way of life and it implies an intense circulation of people and goods across international borders.

Confronted with great hardship, Afghan refugees and migrants have demonstrated their adaptive strategies. The overwhelming majority of Hazaras, in particular, have not relied on humani-

tarian aid to survive. Using their existing cultural resources, moving constantly between Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and beyond, they have been able to open new social, economical and political horizons.

Research methods

In order to describe the interplay of local and global forces and to understand how Afghan migrants are linked to the world system, I mainly apply three methods of observation and analysis: an open and flexible use of the proven concept of network; a focus on the production and distribution of commodities; multi-sited ethnography and transnational studies.

The concept of network was defined by Barnes almost 50 years ago: «The image I have is of a set of points some of which are joined by lines. The points of the image are people, or sometimes groups, and the lines indicate which people interact with each other. We can of course think of the whole of social life as generating a network of this kind.» (Barnes 1954: 43) The network concept has been reformed and adapted to the globalisation context by Ulf Hannerz (1992), who has reduced the importance of individuals and attached considerably greater weight to the strategies of groups such as households, lineages, neighbourhood circles and even tribal segments, and by Emmanuel Marx (1990), who established it as a useful tool for understanding the experience of refugees whose social ties are expanding in different locales. Such an approach goes beyond the permanent institutionalised relations and takes into account the fact that passing ties also reveal essential information about social practices. In the present case, this meant going beyond apparent significance of official kinship relations and tribal or ethnic affiliation, in order to bring to light the actual relations of my informants over the course of their migration trajectories.

The focus on networks and people remains nevertheless insufficient. Study-

ing objects and their social meanings, and describing the production and distribution of a set of services and commodities have proven to be a fruitful approach. Exchanges do not only satisfy material needs, but produce and reproduce social ties. The relation between commodity flows and social ties is thus reciprocal, and, regarding these matters, the remittance system fulfils an essential role among the Afghan migrants. It is a complex set of relations of solidarity and trust and goes far in explaining how Afghan society, despite war and migration, has not collapsed (Monsutti 2005).

These two approaches are encompassed in the concept of multi-sited ethnography defined by Marcus who talks of «tracking» strategies (1995: 95) and who proposes different ways to apply his program: «follow the people», «follow the thing», «follow the metaphor», «follow the plot, story, or allegory», «follow the life or biography», and finally «follow the conflict» (1995: 105-110). As Rouse (1991) states in his research on Mexican migration in the United States, «through the continuous circulation of people, money, goods, and information, the various settlements have become so closely woven together that, in an important sense, they have come to constitute a single community spread across a variety of sites, something I refer to as a “transnational migrant circuit”» (Rouse 1991: 14).

The goal of my current research is to broaden the scope of previous work by studying migratory networks that are increasingly geared towards Western countries. I pay particular attention to the development of new social ties in a diasporic context, through marriage strategies, religious ceremonies, and reciprocity and redistribution expressed through gifts and hospitality. While I have found it difficult – as a man – to interview women in Afghanistan and in the neighbouring countries during my earlier fieldworks, the cultural context of Western host countries allows me to have some access to women’s social lives³.

Migratory circuits are considered as a whole rather than through any one locale.

More than through motivations (why people migrate), they are studied through strategies (how people migrate). I study effective links of solidarity by collecting data on three complementary phenomena: (1) the spatial mobility of individuals, their transnational routes and migrant smuggling rings (travelling is risky, involves trust relationships and implements common economic strategies); (2) the transfer of goods and money, and the trading activities across international borders; and (3) the circulation of information through visits, telephone, letters and e-mail. I do not define the limits of a representative sample at the beginning of the inquiry. To the contrary, using the snowball method common in network studies, I have contacted an initially small number of persons and reconstruct step by step their effective social ties (in particular the negotiations leading to marriages and the amount, frequency, and destination of remittances).

The research is essentially based on qualitative methods such as: participant observation; unstructured and semi-structured interviewing (occasionally supplemented by structured interviewing and questionnaires); life histories; genealogies and kinship charts. The reliability of the data are established by cross-checking and comparing collected information. Their relevance is ascertained through regularity (i.e. when information is given independently by different people) and saturation (i.e. when no new information may be drawn from interviews or observation).

Perspectives and significance of the research

This research brings together detailed ethnography and a wider concern for global migratory and economic flows. Scattered in distant places, Hazaras – and more generally Afghans – have to solve various problems in order to keep their social ties alive. War and exile lead to an inevitable socio-economic redefinition

³ On the model of Werbner’s work (1990) on Pakistanis settled in Manchester.

along very complex lines. Afghan transnational networks are partially built on the traditional bonds of kinship and neighbourhood, while at the same time adapting to new social, economic, and political situations. Among the most striking features of the developed strategies are a multiplicity of registers of solidarity (not only limited to lineage and tribal section), the diversification of the basis for cooperation, multidirectional migratory movements, and the considerable amounts of money remitted to relatives in Afghanistan.

The world-wide trajectories of a specific and limited population of migrants are mapped in order to study new forms of migration in the context of globalisation, to shift the traditional focus from refugees and migrants to transnational communities, and to question the idea that refugees and migrants must make a definitive choice between either repatriation or local integration.

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