

## **A tentative and very sketchy summary of the findings analyzed in my book**

Fariba Adelkhah (SciencesPo/Ceri)

This book is a continuation of my two main works, *La Révolution sous le voile. Femmes islamiques d'Iran* [The Revolution behind the veil. Islamic women in Iran] (1991) and *Etre modern in Iran*, 1998, ( *Being Modern in Iran*, 1999). It ponders the question of what it means to be an Iranian man or woman – the multiple forms of national or cultural identity and of a sense of belonging in times of accelerated social and political change. It strives to unravel a whole series of dichotomies and alternatives in which we tend to imprison ourselves when we write – myself first of all. Distinctions, for example, between the state (*dowlat*) and society (*mellat*), the religious and non-religious, modernity and tradition, Iranian identity and Arabic (or Turkish) identity do have their uses and have inspired several works which remain fruitful. But it is no less useful to look at things from another standpoint so as to further reflection.

This new standpoint is in my book the border.

Certainly, the most obvious representation of Iran is a map that would represent the borders Iran shares with its 14 neighbors. Yet, one knows for sure that this cannot be the only representation of the country. Come to mind other colorful maps that indicate linguistic, ethnic, religious borders or boundaries at a minimum. Those borders only constitute obstacles for the most obtuse of the custom officers. For others, their meaning and functions may evolve according to the context and it is clear that they cannot be understood as an absolute way to separate countries, or ethnic groups or religious affiliations. Porosity and interaction between the two sides of the line are what matter the most.

The purpose of my book is to explore how borders work in such a complex setting and make sense of the multiple ways life plays with them, challenges them and also is constrained by them.

Throughout these pages, I was constantly crossing both sets of borders. It is a matter of decentering our gaze to see what escapes these classifications. It is not a matter of carrying out an anthropology of the margins, the marginalized, the forgotten or the losers of history, or an anthropology on the margins of the social sciences. It is not a matter of deconstructing the centre, the centre of Iranian society or of the social sciences, but of

considering the links and even the quarrels between the centre and the periphery and the foreign elements that have contributed to its development, in history as in knowledge.

And in these interactions, travel is the key: the travels of merchants and workers, the travels of students or the faithful, the travels of conscripts, veterans and administrators, the travels of elected officials and experts, the travels of families and tourists, the travels of exiles, displaced persons and refugees. So our theme will be travel. The multiple ways life plays with them, challenges them and also is constrained by them. Travelling becomes a strategic way to shed light on those aspects and contributes also to the reinvention of identities.

However, travel, as a social practice, produces specific logics of life, just as war does, for example. It releases us from our environment, it immerses us in anonymity and uncertainty, it forces us to focus on achieving a specific goal. In short, it transforms us. This involves joy, exultation, nostalgia, suffering, and fear. Insofar as travel has a particular quality, it raises the question of the adequacy of most of our analytical tools that have been developed to understand the intricacies of societies in the setting of their borders, within their settled state, and within the territorial terms or identities of their established definition – in their hearts, one might almost say. It reminds us that societies do not have any intrinsic essence and that they are constituted in their relationship with the Other – on their very borders. This does not alter the evident fact of their uniqueness. But this uniqueness stems precisely from their interrelations. The anthropology of travel, margins, marches, and the border finally raises questions about the imperturbable representations of itself that this society creates by calling itself, or wishing itself to be, Iranian, Shi'ite, authentic (*asili*); by boasting of its ancient history, even if it has to invent it; and by making it a point of honour to defend its exceptionality. Again, I do not deny the particularity of Iranian society nor reject Iranians' right to be proud of it. I just hope that the following pages will help the reader, as they impelled me, to re-examine the historical and social context that created this often paradoxical difference, and to re-think Iranian history.

Travel, as an anthropological object, has the advantage of articulating or dovetailing heterogeneous elements of society from one place to another, wherever it can be apprehended. It is often said that, in order to know someone well, you have to travel with them. Well, it is the same with societies. Travelling forces us to leave behind the false certainties in which we live. It establishes a critical distance that is not just geographical, but analytical too.

To carry out this project, I decided to mobilize once more this anthropology of travelling that I used when I studied the Iranian communities in Dubai. In fact, Dubai was

a nearly perfect representation of what I was looking for: a population that was moving back and forth between Iran and the UAE for decades, while getting a living standard that was much higher than what they could have expected, had they stayed in southern Iran.

The anthropology of travel is useful at least in two different ways. First of all, it makes possible to emphasize the practices of the travellers and allow to grasp the way borders work. It also pushes to consider history as a flow of events, people and material and immaterial goods, or to use the expression of Sanjay Subrahmanyam, a “connected history” that reveals concrete, circumstantial, fragmentary, heterogeneous links between different societies and people. Such kind of anthropology appeared to me as a strategic tool to understand the reality of these exchanges, and the often paradoxical links that existed between the outside and the inside of a country, and between the margins and the center of a given society.

We often hear that borders are artificial, although it is unclear how borders can be natural. But at the same time, we hear so many statements that emphasize the unity of an ethnic group over the national border to the extent that suddenly this latter seems irrelevant as so dramatically challenged by the unity of an ethnic community. This thinking that we can hear from many people, even sometimes colleagues underestimates many facts for at least two reasons:

1. First borders indeed separate people. We have plenty of examples of ethnic groups that shared the same history for centuries but were suddenly divided for a long period by colonization or war. Differences between them increased, despite the strong attachment to the same ethnic identity. Kurds are a perfect example of that situation and there is no need here to underscore in details the many variations in the way they organise their private sphere or even talk about historic events. Therefore we should stop claiming as a starting point that people from the same ethnic group who live on the two sides of the border share the same identity and values. It might be true in some cases but we need first to carry out the analysis: it should be a finding, not an assumption.
2. Because of the practices, the borders enhance (such as smuggling), one should pay attention to the local know-how but also notice that the border means by itself an added value: the border is a resource more than an obstacle. There are plenty of examples how this works concretely either on the Iran/Turkey border or on the Iraqi/Iranian border. And of course, it is important to highlight that the know-how exists on both sides of the border but is not identical because it refers to two

different societies when connections to avoid custom, deal with the administrative authorities follow different patterns.

Let us cultivate another paradox, contrary to common sense, Iranian nationalism has proved very strong on its frontiers, despite all those transnational activities. This claim for a national identity should be analysed: it may actually have been a smart way to limiting the intrusion of the state at the local level as far as it was not contested. By claiming their loyalty to Iran and casting votes in all elections, Kurds or Baluchis can carry out their smuggling more easily than if they were attracting national attention by claiming their ethnic or another particularist identity.

A further dimension of my book is to call for a much better and deeper analysis of what those changes were and meant in the history. These recurrent reshaping of values did not take place in a vacuum. These changes also took place not only because the Iranian side was interested in them whatever stakeholders is put under this "Iranian side". The other side, Dubai, Pakistan, Afghanistan, also had economic or cultural operators who wanted these connections to develop at all costs. One may compare that situation with the push/pull factors in the migrations. These tensions initiated from any sides of the border call for studying this imperfect dialectic that produces migrations, development and hybridization.

This book is a work of social science. It does not take sides in the current public debate. But it does perhaps contain a political education. Every Iranian is the site of a tension that is precisely the object of my analysis. On the one hand, he is the bearer of discourses of exclusion, whether they draw their authority from the nation, from Islam, from secularism, from the republic or from the monarchy. On the other hand, he develops inclusive practices in his travels, his religious sociability, and his economic exchanges. He partly claims to embody the origin of Iranian identity, its roots, by naturalizing it and claiming a monopoly on it, in the 'You won't find anyone more authentic than me' mode. But he also continues to cross the borders that distinguish him from his fellow citizens by regional or religious origin, by gender, or by ideological orientation.

More specifically, this book is that of an anthropologist, not a historian. It is based primarily on the observation, often the participant observation, of actors and their practices. However, I also evoke the past and I quote the work of historians, particularly in Chapter 1. From this point of view, I do not claim to be exhaustive or, let me repeat, to be working as a historian. I am aware of the risk of simplifying the facts or being reductive with regard to the studies and debates of my colleagues. But then, my only goal is to provide readers with reference points against which they can better map my remarks.

Similarly, this is not a work on migration and diasporas. These themes have inspired a detailed and high-quality literature; so it seemed better, in my view, to change the angle of analysis and focus on the experience of displacement which is constitutive. Thus I have avoided the aporia of having to define the different categories of travelers – the categories of the exile, the refugee, the displaced person, the economic migrant, the expatriate, the businessman, the pilgrim, the tourist, the student, the fighter, etc. These categories are often fungible or successive in a person's life story. And one thing then becomes crystal clear: travel is central rather than exceptional. On a day to day basis, our societies are born and sustained by movement, by displacement – long before we even mention the word 'globalization'.

Now let me come back to two questions raised up at the end of my talk.

First, the relationships with the State or its role in these exchanges. They are not fixed and one explanation is that the state is somewhat present at all moments of the travel. What this state allows is certainly not what is expected from a Weberian state, as it witnesses many things that clearly challenge its authority. Yet, the state may sometimes be smarter than others. Crossborder smuggling or informal trade can be a way to provide resources to undeveloped areas, sometimes to potentially dissident areas and regain a legitimacy that has been lost by decades of disinterest. Baluchistan and Kurdistan provide two interesting and different examples of that situation. As long as people make money, they do not revolt. By allowing these traffics, the state is no more seen as an overcentralised power that abuses minorities but as a complicit stakeholder in the new economy. The state won't claim that in Teheran and the officials won't theorize this policy in public speeches but the ground stratagem is functioning.

Second, the identity claimed by the Iranians in the diaspora. As most other diasporas, the Iranian one is not shy to claim its Iranity, and this should not be very surprising. The diaspora has always had a stronger national claim than the locals have, and this is true in any diaspora in the world. That said, Iranian migrants did not leave Iran to build only a small Tehran in Los Angeles. They should also cope with the tough environment they live in, so they have to make their business too. The identity requirement goes hand in hand with the diasporic dimension. What makes the Westwood Blvd in Los Angeles interesting is that, by some aspects it is very American, but by others, and at the same time, marked by Iranian landmarks. In any case, migrants always act in the same way, because they must settle in an area they do not know. As a result they will rebuild something that is a new

object! An Iranian identity which is different on many aspects from what Iranians pretend while living in Iran.