

Micheline Centlivres-Demont (ed), *Afghanistan. Identity, Society and Politics since 1980*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2015.

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With *Afghanistan. Identity, Society and Politics since 1980*, Micheline Centlivres-Demont provides us with an important and far-reaching work (to which I am proud to have marginally contributed). The selected 74 articles (some authors having written several of them) have originally been published between 1982 and 2013. The journal from which the articles were taken, *Afghanistan Info*, was supported by a “Committee for the Support of the Afghan People”. Original articles were written in French, German or English in order to facilitate quick publishing and diversity of nationalities from the contributors. The articles are presented in chronological order, providing an original way to follow contemporary Afghan history. Articles are short, forcing authors to develop a single idea as synthetically as possible. Glatzer’s article (page 197) on the census of nomads is a classic of the genre, deconstructing in two pages the mode of calculation of the nomadic population through an anthropological analysis and highlighting its political implications. Some of contributions are comments on current events, the authors writing in the heat of a rapidly evolving situation, therefore accepting to risk their “reputational capital”. I will develop three remarks to show how this book embodies the complex nature of the field research in Afghanistan:

Firstly, authors have various backgrounds: academics, specialized journalists, humanitarian workers, diplomats, activists (and sometimes all of it at the same time). This diversity mirrors a specific milieu, in which knowledge circulated well, but informally, mainly in Peshawar and Kabul, according to the different periods. I recall vividly how exchanges with some specialized journalists or NGOs workers were often very stimulating, all the more as the absence of competition was facilitating information-sharing.

Secondly, the literature mirrors the various specializations, mostly anthropology, economy, political science. In addition, authors were expressing themselves more freely and normatively than they would have in an academic or humanitarian publication. This space of discussion was also welcomed since it was not aimed at scientific popularization (such as the op-eds in the press), but allowed more nuanced and complex analyses. In fact, openness was only possible because it could be done in both a knowledgeable and knowledge-driven milieu. In addition, the papers were often (but not always) back-from-the-field accounts and forecast often justly coming trends: Gilbert Etienne’s paper (page 156) argued as early as 2002 that reconstruction was heading the wrong way; Donini’s one of 2004 (page 178) highlighted the humanitarian actors’ mistakes, warned that the Taliban were returning and pointed to the inanity of the US strategy.

Finally, the policy of the exceptionally warm-hearted and open-minded editor was to let divergent point of views (at least from informed and well-intentioned observers) coexists. This is for example true for texts dealing with the Taliban. The phenomenon is simultaneously described by scholars with opposite conclusions: totalitarian movement, clerical revolution, ethnic movement. The reader, with the benefit of hindsight, will be able to grasp what the debates were at that time and to derive his own conclusions. More importantly, it shows how productive was – and still is - this “public space” dedicated to Afghanistan.