

The organic ethnologist of Algerian migration

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ABSTRACT ■ One of the most original contributions to the anthropology of immigration of the past century, the work of the late Adelmalek Sayad demonstrates the potency of three principles for the study of peregrination. The first insists that, before becoming an immigrant, the migrant is first an e-migrant and that the sociology of migration must therefore start, not from the receiving society, but from the structure and contradictions of the sending communities. The second takes seriously the fact that migration is the product of a historical relation of inter-national domination, at once material and symbolic, a repressed relation of state to state which every migrant unwittingly recapitulates in her personal strategies and experiences. The third recognizes that, like other processes of group (un)making, migration requires collective dissimulation and social duplicity. A corollary of these principles is that the sociology of migration must be reflexive and include a social history of the lay and scholarly discourses that swirl about it in the societies involved. Sayad elaborated these propositions because he was more than a scholar of migration: he was the phenomenon itself. The ethnographic sensibility and rigor that animate his work were rooted in his active solidarity with Kabyle migrants; they enabled him to dismantle prefabricated representations of

immigration and to use the migrant, as social hybrid devoid of legitimate place, in the manner of a flesh-and-blood analyser of the collective unconscious and to pose anew the question of the relationship between citizen, state, and nation.

KEY WORDS ■ migration, Algeria, Kabylia, collective duplicity, social unconscious, nationality, reflexivity

Adelmalek Sayad passed away two years ago at this writing, leaving behind him one of the most original and fertile contributions to the anthropology of immigration of the past century. Throughout his voluminous and varied writings – close to a hundred publications, including eight books spanning the destruction of Algeria's traditional peasantry at the hands of French colonialism, the dynamics of migration chains from Kabylia to France, the impact of decolonization on the reception of Algerian workers in Marseilles, the odyssey of those workers and their children through the layers and institutions of French society, the social uses and political abuses of 'immigrant culture' and the everyday life of Algerian slums on the Parisian periphery during the 1950s, all informed by an acute awareness of the political-economic roots and import of human transhumance¹ – the Algerian sociologist both elaborated and demonstrated the potency of three pivotal principles for the study of migration.

The first is the simple but fundamental proposition, the implications of which remain to be fully drawn out by scholars and policy makers alike, that *before he or she becomes an immigrant, the migrant is always first an emigrant*, and that the sociology of migration must therefore imperatively start, not from the concerns and cleavages of the receiving society, but from the sending communities, their history, structure and contradictions. The common contraction of the emigration-immigration doublet to its second component mutilates the phenomenon and entraps the study of migrants into an artificial problematic of 'lack' and deficiency explained away by ritualized references, now to their lower class composition and substandard conditions of living, now to the peculiarities of the culture they have brought with them.² Resisting such ethnocentric imposition, the sociology of migration must take as its object not the 'problems' that migrants pose for the advanced societies which attract them, in matters of employment, housing, schooling and health, but the dynamic 'relationship between the system of dispositions of emigrants and the ensemble of mechanisms to which they are subjected owing to this emigration' (Sayad, 1999a: 57). This necessitates that one reconstitute the *complete trajectory* of the individuals, households and groups involved in the peregrination under examination, in order to uncover the full system of determinants that first triggered exile and later continued, under new guises, to govern the differentiated paths they followed.

Recognizing that 'immigration here and emigration there are the two indisassociable sides of the same reality, which cannot be explained the one without the other' (Sayad, 1999a: 15) enables Sayad to revoke, both empirically and theoretically, the canonical opposition between 'labor migration' and 'settlement migration'. The former always contains the latter *in nuce* and always eventuates in it: the individual departure of wage-seeking men gradually saps the 'work of prevention and preservation' whereby the group seeks to maintain moral control over its members, and sooner or later the latter 'abandons itself to family migration', which further accelerates the erosion of group boundaries.³ Relinking emigration and immigration points also to the second pillar-proposition anchoring Abdelmalek Sayad's work: that migration is the product and expression of an *historical relation of inter-national domination*, at once material and symbolic. Immigration is a 'relation of state to state' but one that is 'denied as such in everyday reality' no less than in the political field (Sayad, 1991: 267), so that its management may fall within the sovereign province of the receiving society alone, of its laws, administrative rules and bureaucratic dictates, and be treated as the 'domestic' issue which it is not. Sayad (1979) shows, in the paradigmatic case of France and Algeria in the post-colonial and post-Fordist era after the flow of 'migrant laborers' has been officially stopped, that the 'negotiations' between countries that lead to international conventions and regulations concerning immigration are 'bilateral transactions' in name only since the dominant economic power and former colonial ruler is in a structural position to impose unilaterally the terms, goals and means of these agreements.⁴

But there is more: every migrant carries this repressed relation of power between states within himself or herself and unwittingly recapitulates and re-enacts it in their personal strategies and experiences. Thus the most fleeting encounter between an Algerian worker and his French boss in Lyon – or a Surinamese-born child and his schoolteacher in Rotterdam, a Jamaican mother and her social worker in London, an Ethiopian elderly man and his landlord in Naples – is fraught with the whole baggage of past intercourse between the imperial metropole and its erstwhile colony. The relation of the emigrant to his homeland is likewise invisibly over-determined by decades of conflictual and asymmetric relations between the two countries he links: the 'suspicion of treason, even of apostasy' that enshrouds him there (Sayad, 1999a: 171) finds its root in the fact that emigration has shaken the very foundations of the social order, on the one hand, by corroding the established frontiers between groups in the sending society and, on the other, by affording the migrant and his kin an accelerated path of mobility but in an allochthonous hierarchy, one devoid of legitimacy in the moral and cultural codes of the originating community.⁵

A third proposition animates Sayad's tireless inquiries: like other key processes of group making and unmaking, migration has for requisite

collective dissimulation and social duplicity. Emigration, and later immigration, operates in the way it does only to the extent that it continually mystifies and misrecognizes itself for what it is – or, to put it more precisely, the magical denegation (*Verneinung*) of the objective reality of migration is part and parcel of its full objectivity, its ‘double truth.’ Thus, throughout the 20th century, the French authorities, Algerian society and the migrants themselves colluded in concocting a triple lie that allowed all three to justify to themselves the trek of millions of peasants from the Maghrib to the hexagon: that migration was provisional and transitory, that it was determined solely by the quest for labor (‘I came here to work so I drown myself in work’, intones a Kabyle factory hand), and that it was politically neutral and without civic consequence on either side of the Mediterranean (Sayad, 1991: 17–18). All three of these beliefs were glaringly and continually disputed, if not refuted, by social reality; yet none of the parties to the Algerian migration was willing to face that reality. Emigration is never an ‘export of raw labor power and nothing more’ (Sayad, 1999a: 20) because, as a ‘total social fact’ in Marcel Mauss’s (1990) sense of the term, it disrupts the whole array of institutions that make up the originating society. Conversely, at the other end, immigrant workers are but exceptionally ‘birds of passage’, to recall Michael Piore’s (1977) well-known book, for they too are changed in and by migration: they become irrevocably distanced and dis-located from their originating milieu, losing a place in their native circle of honor without securing one in their new setting; they acquire this false and disjointed ‘double-consciousness’⁶ that is source of both succor and pain; they are consumed by doubt, guilt and self-accusation, worn down by an ‘unjust and uncertain’ battle with their own children, these ‘sociological bastards’ who personify the horrifying impossibility of the ‘return home’ (Sayad, 1988). A retired Algerian laborer settled in a working-class *banlieue* of Paris puts it pithily:

France, I’m gonna tell you, is a low-life woman, like a whore. Without you knowing it, she encircles you, she takes to seducing you until you’ve fallen for her and then she sucks your blood, she makes you wait on her hand and foot. . . . She is a sorceress. She has taken so many men with her . . . she has a way of keeping you a prisoner. Yes, she is a prison, a prison from which you cannot get out, a prison for life. This is a curse. . . . Now I have no more reason to return [to my home village in Algeria]. I have nothing left to do there. It no longer interests me. Everything has changed. Things no longer have the same meaning. You no longer know why you are here in France, of what use you are. There is no more order. (cited in Sayad, 1991: 126–7, 137)

A corollary of these three analytic principles is that the sociology of migration must be *reflexive*, turned back onto its own conditions of possibility and effectivity. It must include a social history not only of the double-sided fact of emigration–immigration but also of the lay and scholarly

discourses that swirl about this fact in the two societies involved. For the collective perception of migration, its symbolic elaboration and its political construction (of which social science partakes every time it takes over the presuppositions of the official viewpoint) are an integral constituent of its objective reality. Sayad inspects the loaded semantics that have governed the framing of the question of North African entry into France since the Second World War, from 'adaptation' (to the requirements of industrial labor) and 'assimilation' (to the republican national culture) to 'insertion' and 'integration' (into the social fabric and institutions of the society of settlement), to reveal that discourses on immigration are always performative discourses which help effect the wondrous social alchemy whereby a 'foreigner' is made into a 'national' (Sayad, 1987, 1994).

All this Sayad knew or discovered because he was more than a scholar of immigration: *he was the phenomenon itself*. As a native son of the province of Sidi Aïch, in the Little Kabylia mountains, who had risen to the rank of primary school teacher before receiving his training in philosophy, psychology and sociology at the universities of Algiers and Paris during the war of national liberation and who then became a research director at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), the brute facts of imperial oppression, chain migration, community dislocation and fractured acculturation were constantly with him because they were *within him*: they were his entrails, his eyes, his soul.⁷ Yet he faced them with a moral intrepidity and an intellectual deftness that astonish the reader who knew him, his history, and that of his people – on both sides of the Mediterranean – and that cannot but impress even those who did not. For some 40-odd years, Sayad was present in the field, in his home village of Kabylia, in the military 'relocation settlements' of the Ouarsenis and Collo regions, in the slums of Constantine and the bazaars of Algiers, and later still in the social housing estates of Saint-Denis, Nanterre, and Villeurbanne. There, he displayed all these personal virtues of which textbooks of methodology say nothing but which all too often decide the depth and justness of ethnographic work, in listening, observing, recording, transcribing and transmitting the words he elicited and welcomed, with a sympathy devoid of pathos, a complicity shorn of naiveté, a comprehension stripped of complacency and condescension. A frail, soft-spoken and self-effacing person, Sayad was among this very small group of individuals with whom one feels genuinely at home when introduced to a farmer from Kabylia or Béarn, or entering the abode of a Berber-speaking manual worker from Sétif or the Parisian Red Belt. The uncommon combination of discretion and dignity he displayed, the sensitivity and modesty he invested in every exchange with his informants can be readily detected in the adroitness with which he accounts for their words, the sensitivity with which he pries into the causes and the reasons behind their actions.

His active solidarity with the most dispossessed was the basis of an exceptional epistemological lucidity that allowed Abdelmalek Sayad to dismantle a good many prefabricated representations about immigration – such as the economic problematic of its ‘costs and benefits’, which journalists and policy-makers periodically invoke, with the diligent help of economists, so as better to mask the specifically political dimension and springs of the phenomenon – and to uncover and confront head-on the most complex issues – such as the orchestrated lies of collective bad faith that fuel migration streams or the existential roots of the ‘migration malaise’ that afflicts the immigrant worker even after he has been medically cured of occupational illness⁸ – just as he would enter an unknown household to find himself immediately greeted with respect, trust and affection. It allowed him to find the right words, and the right tone, to speak of experiences as contradictory and chaotic as the social conditions of which they were the product and to anatomize them by mobilizing with equal perspicacity the intellectual resources of traditional Kabyle culture, rethought through ethnological works (as with the notion of *el ghorba* or the opposition between *thaymats* and *thaddjaddith*), and the conceptual arsenal elaborated by the research team at the Centre de sociologie européenne of which he was, from its very inception, an active and influential member.

In the hands of so skilled an analyst, the immigrant functions in the manner of a live, flesh-and-blood analyser of the most obscure regions of the social unconscious. Sayad ultimately shows us how, like Socrates according to Plato, the immigrant is *atopos*, a quaint hybrid devoid of place, displaced, in the twofold sense of incongruous and inopportune, trapped in that ‘mongrel’ sector of social space betwixt and between social being and nonbeing. Neither citizen nor foreigner, neither on the side of the Same nor on that of the Other, he exists only by default in the sending community and by excess in the receiving society, and he generates recurrent recrimination and resentment in both (Sayad, 1984, 1988). Out-of-place in the two social systems which define his (non)existence, the migrant forces us, through the obdurate social vexation and mental embarrassment he causes, to rethink root and branch the question of the legitimate foundations of citizenship and of the relationship between citizen, state and nation. For the physical and moral suffering endured by the e-migrant reveals to the ethnographer who follows his slow and painful metamorphosis into the im-migrant, everything that native (i.e. natal) embeddedness in a definite nation and state buries into the deepest recesses of the organism, in a state of quasi-nature, beyond the reach of consciousness and ratiocination, starting with the viscerally felt equation most societies establish between nationality and membership in the citizenry. Through experiences (in the sense of *Erlebnis*) which are, for she who knows how to dissect and decipher them, so many experimentations (in the sense of *Erfahrung*), he enables us to discover those

'statified' (*étatisés*) minds and bodies, as Thomas Bernard calls them (Bourdieu, 1994; Sayad, 1999b), which a highly peculiar history has endowed us with and which all too often prevents us from recognizing and respecting all the manifold forms of the human condition.

As the organic ethnologist of Algerian migration, the witness-analyst of the silent drama of the mass exodus of the Berber peasants of Kabylia into the industrial underbelly of their former colonial overlord, Abdelmalek Sayad gives us an exemplary figure of the sociologist as 'public scribe', who records and broadcasts, with anthropological acuity and poetic grace, the voice of those most cruelly dispossessed of it by the crushing weight of imperial subordination and class domination, without ever instituting himself as a spokesperson, without ever using these given words to give lessons, except lessons in ethnographic integrity, scientific rigor and civic courage.



Abdelmalek Sayad in Rio de Janeiro (1990)

Notes

- 1 These books are respectively (in English titles): *The Uprooting: The Crisis of Traditional Agriculture in Algeria* (Bourdieu and Sayad, 1964), *Algerian Immigration in France* (Gillette and Sayad, 1976), *The Social Uses of the*

- Culture of Immigrants* (Sayad, 1978), *Towards a Sociology of Immigration* (Sayad and Fassa, 1982), *Migrating – A History of Marseilles: The Shock of Decolonization* (Temime, Jordi and Sayad, 1991), *Immigration, or the Paradoxes of Otherness* (Sayad, 1991) and *An Algerian Nanterre, Land of Slums* (Sayad with Dupuy, 1995). The culmination and quintessence of Sayad's five decades of incessant research is *Double Absence: From the Illusions of the Emigrant to the Suffering of the Immigrant* (Sayad, 1999a).
- 2 A rare and remarkable exception to this pattern, deserving of a wide readership for its multi-level, comparative and interdisciplinary approach, is Massey, Durand and Alarcon (1987). Recent work on 'transnational communities' has fostered a belated if limited recognition of the double-sidedness and dual determinacy of migration (see the special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* on the topic edited by Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt, 1999, and Portes, 1999).
 - 3 Sayad (1999a: 422–4) points out that, however virulent they may be in the society of immigration, the reactions of protest and opposition to migration are initially even stronger among the emigrating community, so strong indeed that they often make nativist and xenophobic resistance to foreigners in the receiving country superfluous.
 - 4 The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for the United States with Mexico and the Caribbean, or Germany with Turkey, Spain with Morocco, Japan with Korea, etc.
 - 5 This explains why public accusations against emigration typically 'aim primarily and more violently at the emigrated female population and, more precisely, at the bodies of women', perceived as the ultimate repository and vector of the values of the group (Sayad, 1984).
 - 6 Here the writings of Sayad evoke strongly those of W.E.B. DuBois. Compare, for instance, his discussion of the 'sociological doubling-up' of the emigrant, who 'bears within himself, as a product of his history, in the manner of the colonized, a two-fold and contradictory system of references' in his brilliant essay 'The Illegitimate Children' (Sayad, 1977) and DuBois's (1903) classic analysis of the 'two-ness' or 'double-consciousness' of African Americans in the United States in *The Souls of Black Folks*.
 - 7 Sayad describes his early intellectual and political experiences as well as his intellectual training in Arfaoui (1996); see also Sayad (1995).
 - 8 Cf. respectively, Sayad (1977, 1986, 1981a, 1981b) and his vivisection of exile as a fall into social darkness in '*El ghorba*' (Sayad, 2000, in this issue).

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