The Global Horizon

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Throughout the 1990s, anthropological studies of migration were largely assimilated to the study of processes of globalization, emphasizing ‘transnational social fields’ and social networks based on new technologies of international communication, new forms of social mobility, economic opportunity, and fluid or hybrid identities. As Knut Graw and Samuli Schielke note, this perspective reflected the public preoccupations, governmental policies, and media-driven discourse of the receiving countries, and usually left the lived experiences of migrants unexplored. *The Global Horizon* marks the coming of age of a paradigm that Sarah Mahler calls ‘transnationalism from below’ (Mahler 1998), focused on the personal expectations, moral dilemmas, and changing worldviews of African migrants. The leitmotif is mobility – geographic, social, and existential – and the critical questions concern the forms of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, both fantasized and realized, among young Africans moving in the shadows of the global village, testing the limits of what is possible and endurable, trying out new tactics for crossing entrenched boundaries, and doing things their forefathers could only have dreamed of. To some extent Arjun Appadurai registers this shift from a Euro-American statist discourse to a phenomenology of African modes of being-in-the-world in *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006, ix) where he remarks that his earlier work, *Modernity at Large* (1996), had painted a somewhat too rosy picture of globalization and neglected to explore the violence, exclusion and inequality that characterized the poor and dispossessed who sought to improve their life chances by migrating to the global north. The shift is also noted by James Ferguson, who writes of the need to centre discussions of the global ‘less on transnational flows and images of unfettered connection than on the social relations that selectively constitute global society’ (Ferguson 2006, 23, emphasis added).

Though the present volume was anticipated by the publication of *Hard Work, Hard Times: Global Volatility and African Subjectivities* (Makhulu, Buggenhagen and Jackson, 2010), Knut Graw and Samuli Schielke provide a sophisticated theo-
retical prolegomenon to a more ‘experience-near’ anthropology of migration and mobility, together with a set of in-depth empirical explorations of migrant lives and imaginaries that afford new insights into the various motives, tactics, dilemmas, dreams, and disappointments that characterize migration within and out of Africa in the early 21st century. What I find singularly impressive in many of these essays is a sensitivity to the ways in which the quandaries of African migrants are not entirely unique to Africa or to people moving between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ lifeworlds. While more intensely felt by the young seeking to find a way out of a world of limited opportunity and circumscribed values, these aporias of transition are familiar to us all, whatever our age, gender, ethnicity or social status — namely, the impossibility of calculating what one may lose in leaving a settled life or homeplace and what one may gain by risking oneself in an alien environment, the difficulty of striking a balance between personal fulfillment and the moral claims of kinship, and the struggle to know the difference between what Ernst Bloch called ‘concrete’ and ‘abstract’ utopias (the first reasonable and worth pursuing; the second hopelessly unattainable). It interests me that the anthropologist’s quest to do justice to these lives in limbo also entails a dilemma, for how can we judge when it is helpful to have recourse to abstract, experience-distant models of transnationality, global processes, collapsed capitalism, failed states, neoliberalism, and postcolonial or post-Cold War policies (to mention only a few of the terms currently deployed), and when it is more edifying to provide experience-near accounts of what Knut Graw calls ‘the existential aspects of migration’ and the widening, disorienting ‘horizons’ that take people to the very limit of what can be coped with or comprehended. Because many of the essays in this volume succeed in interweaving these discursive and descriptive modes of writing, and not allowing one to overwhelm the other, it is possible for the reader to decide for himself or herself which perspective gives the greater explanatory yield.

Some of the most compelling passages concern the kinds of strategies — behavioural as well as imaginative — that migrants invent or conjure in negotiating foreign terrains and adverse circumstances. To find oneself stuck, at an impasse, unable to make anything happen, waiting for one’s luck to change or something to turn up, defines one of the most dispiriting situations in which a person can find himself or herself. To be immobilized is to be deprived agency, not to be able to make choices or exercise judgement, to be beholden to others or bound by circumstance. Mobility is crucial. To feel that one is on the move and getting somewhere is to possess, if only for a moment, what Bourdieu called illusio — a sense of forthcoming that bolsters one’s conviction that one’s hard work and suffering will secure a just reward,
that one’s investments of time and effort will pay off, that freedom is not a pipe dream, that hope is warranted (Bourdieu 2000, 208-213). But all too often one’s minimal gains fail to compensate for what one wagered and lost. The life on which one staked everything sometimes turns out to be a life barely worth living (Lucht 2011). A mobile phone puts one instantly in touch with a scattered network of family and friends, but the love and solidarity of a face-to-face community no longer exists. One’s small successes in a foreign country do not make up for one’s estrangement from one’s natal land. Instead of becoming somebody, a person of substance, one may experience oneself as a nobody, one’s hands empty, one’s morale exhausted. The migrant is often locked in an endless struggle, not only for an income, for food, for a safe haven; he is desperate to be seen as a success in the eyes of the folks back home as well as to gain a sense of legitimacy and normalcy in the face of everyday reminders that he is illegitimate, excluded, unwanted, and outside the law in the country to which he migrated (Agamben 1998, 21). The migrant’s struggle for ontological security is a struggle against stigma, against being diminished, degraded or unfairly treated in his everyday dealings with locals, and of having to constantly justify to himself and others the sacrifice he has made in leaving kith and kin for an ostensibly better life abroad. And yet the migrant seldom doubts his human right to be given a chance, to vindicate his claim to a share of the bounty of the society he has entered. A logic of sacrifice informs the migrant imagination – the axiom that one must give up in order to gain, empty oneself in order to be filled, place one’s hope in another, elsewhere, in order to achieve personal autonomy (Jackson 2011, 70-72). The assumption of common humanity, and an implicit ethic of generalized reciprocity, transcends the worldview that worth is relative to birth. It implies a cosmopolitan sense that one inhabits not so much a world without borders as a world in which one is entitled to cross those borders in quest of a better life (Schielke this volume, Chapter 9), to see it for oneself, whatever the risks and whatever the cost (Alpes this volume, Chapter 2). For many young people in Sierra Leone, their patience with the powers that be, whether traditional chiefs or contemporary politicians, has worn thin. For them, their due is merited by need not social status, by their humanity not their nationality. And because need is more of a subjective matter than a matter of what is decided for one by others, the question arises for anthropology as to whether we may now speak of a historically unprecedented and radical break from ‘traditional’ values, centred on the eternal recapitulation of time-honoured ancestral protocols, respect for elders, subsistence economies and stoic values (God’s time’) or whether what is ostensibly new is simply a variant of archetypal forms, either cultural or human. This argument for rupture
finds expression in Charles Piot’s recent observation that Africa is now characterized by ‘a culture and imaginary of exile’ in which everyone is searching for exit strategies that will carry them away to a utopian elsewhere either through geographical migration or occult forms of transport and affective transformation (Piot 2010, 3-4), and in Achille Mbembe’s pronouncement that Africa ‘is turning inwards on itself in a very serious way’ (Mbembe 2001, 68). However, ethnographies of the longue durée and in-depth ethnographic biographies cast doubt on this model of radical discontinuity and call into question the analytical usefulness of antinomies like modernity/tradition, global/local, social/psychological. Classic African ethnographies have documented the tensions and antagonisms between the old and the young, between gerontocratic regimes and local cult associations, and between communal constraints and private yearnings. Migration has always been two-way (as locals depart, ‘strangers’ arrive), with migrants fantasizing return as well facing the ethical dilemma of how individual gains made in the wider world (the symbolic ‘bush’) may also serve the social weal. In her penetrating exploration of the trope of seeing among the Kasena of northern Ghana, Ann Cassiman (Chapter 7), shows how an imagery of enlightenment pervades both village rituals of transition, initiation and divination and the worldview of the migrant who seeks illumination and transfiguration abroad. The visual metaphor of understanding as seeing is reprised and applied as people explore new possibilities of making their way in the world. But there is continuity here, so that the ritual opening of the granary to a man’s first-born son is like the opening of the world to the migrant, who hopes to sustain himself and his kin with the bounty potentially afforded by it. Filip De Boeck (Chapter 3) focuses on what is commonly called occult or libidoonal economies to make a similar point. The proliferation of Pentecostal churches, informal economies, and NGOs in contemporary Kinshasa (and by extension, any contemporary African city) might appear to signal a dramatic shift toward new, future-oriented social imaginaries in which a person seeks fame and fortune either through divine intervention, successful migration, or ecstatic experience. But the utopian yearnings, mimetic desire, and magical thinking that find expression in a passion for lotteries, scams and pyramid schemes, fantasies of liaisons with foreigners, membership of churches that promise supernatural abundance, internet searches for exit strategies, and a turn to the intense if transient pleasures of sex, drugs and popular music have antecedents in alliances with djinn, blessings received from ancestors in return for sacrificial offerings and patience, not to mention dalliances, music-making, festivity and the fetishistic value placed on imported commodities and magical medicines (Jackson 2007, 130-131; 2011, 150-157). This is succinctly captured in Samuli Schielke’s
anecdote of a pecunious Alexandrian teacher who would walk along the waterfront, sometimes turning his eyes to the affluent high-rise buildings and sometimes to the sea, imagining ‘that on the other side there is someone who, miserable and depressed just like me, looks across the sea and dreams of the other side.’ In January and February 2011, a third dreaming site suddenly emerges, with demonstrations along the Corniche Road for the ouster of Hosni Mubarak and the end of the political corruption that had thwarted so many Egyptians in their search for a better life. Although De Boeck’s essay on the social imaginaries of Kinshasa concludes that migration is not simply geographical but a form of ‘mind travel, turning specific locales in both the North and South into virtual and imagined sites, or states of mind’ he makes it clear that Congolese have always had recourse to such fantasized modes of mobility and techniques of the self, citing witchcraft and Lunda biographies to underline the fact that people have, under certain circumstances, always transgressed cultural, gender and status constraints in their opportunistic and inventive quests for greater agency and more viable lives. It may be generally true that an emphasis on inwardness, affect and self-realization stands in dramatic contrast to the prevailing ethos of a ‘traditional’ culture where duty, forbearance and respect for elders imply an acceptance of life as one finds it, and the suppression of thoughts and feelings that challenge the status quo. One might also say that, traditionally, lip service was paid to the idea that one must sacrifice personal gratification and spontaneous self-expression to attain adulthood and make sociality viable (the implication being that what is good for the many will prove good for the individual), and that collective rituals and everyday practices of commensality, neighbourliness and cooperation reinforced the common good. But one must be wary of seeing ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ as competing ontologies, or of supposing that one or the other of these theoretical extremes dominates every human consciousness simply because it dominates public discourse. Moreover, it must be pointed out that the appearance or disappearance of any episteme is never adventitious. The foregrounding or back- grounding of any language for describing human being-in-the-world usually follows radical disruptions to the social fabric – civil war, famine, epidemic illness, displacement and urbanization. The essays in this volume succeed in depicting these backgrounds of deprivation, crisis and scarcity without, however, seeing migration as an intrinsically new phenomenon that we can interpret as a sign of the times, a symptom of general anomie tied to failed states, global economic decline, media scenarios, or foreign ideologies. By describing actual lives and life experiences, the authors of these essays succeed in showing that statistical pictures, media images and migration patterns hide as much reality as they reveal, and that migration is
not an option for everyone. Africa has always been much more open to new possibilities, much more opportunistic in its attitude to outside religions, medicines, strangers and commodities, than the Eurocentric cliché of closed societies and closed minds has ever allowed. But, as in any human society, strategies for resolving a crisis will be entertained and explored with caution and ambivalence. What is seen as a source of hope today may plunge one into despair tomorrow. That which promises new life for oneself may spell death for another. And so migration will be experienced differently by men and women, mothers and sons, old and young, subsistence farmers and urban-dwellers, rich and poor. For some it is a real possibility; for others it is the stuff of folktales. Only by complementing ethnography with biography may we see how complex the phenomenon is, and how wary we must be in clustering diverse experience under a seemingly unitary label. The cult of inwardness and the cultivation of emotional and affective life that accompanied the rise of the urban bourgeoisie in Europe did not preclude cultures of communitas and nostalgia for the agrarian past, and it is perhaps this tension between traditional and modernity, played out in the lived dilemmas of individuals, that we need to describe in more detail in order to temper the search for explanatory generalizations with descriptions of the inventiveness and resourcefulness of people, whatever category we assign them to, so reminding us that human lives are as shaped by historical events as they give shape to them. Filip De Boeck puts it very well.

In order to capture and read into the realities of these different trajectories, movements and migrations, I believe it is absolutely necessary to stay close to the actual lives of those who move through these various worlds, close to the specific lines these lives describe, the specific itineraries that unfold in the processes of living in contexts that are indeed often marked by a lack of opportunity, a lack that – paradoxically – often creates opportunities on other levels. (De Boeck this volume, 82)

In as much as lives do not unfold in straight lines, our attempts to narrate and explain these lives should avoid the same cause-effect models of linearity and history, for there are many temporalities within history, such as the subjective time of reverie and dream, of memory, of crisis and impasse. Anthropology is only now recovering a sense of these penumbral and irreducible worlds of limit experience and quotidian struggle.
References


