

Shahram Khosravi
**“ILLEGAL” TRAVELLER:
 AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY
 OF BORDERS**

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To say that Khosravi’s *“Illegal” Traveller: An Auto-Ethnography of Borders* is a book about border crossing is an understatement. This is a book about sensory and embodied experiences of borders from different standpoints, where current debates on the regulation of human mobility are approached through the author’s own.

Auto-ethnographies have often been criticised for being too emotional and unscientific, but in fact the value of an auto-ethnography is indeed in its ability to convey to the reader the emotional experiences of the author who is simultaneously the ethnographer and his own research participant, if you will. This book is not a biography and it is certainly not to be taken as a novel. It is an ethnography in its true meaning. Ethnographic data is presented, rich empirical insights are provided, pertinent questions are raised, analysis is discussed and points are argued. In his introduction, Khosravi advocates the usefulness of auto-ethnography to “explore abstract concepts of policy and law and translate them into cultural terms grounded in everyday

life” (p. 5). I contend that the author has managed to do so successfully by relating his own border narrative, and those of his informants, to the relevant academic literature, particularly in a discussion of the regulation of human mobility through the nation-state system.

The book is divided into nine main sections, encompassing an introduction, seven chapters and a coda. It further contains an appendix detailing the destinations of the migrants we come to know throughout the book, i.e. Khosravi’s co-travellers, and a preface that marks the issues to be dealt with through the description of two separate events: the author’s own step into illegality at the Iran/Afghanistan border, and the suicide of an Iranian asylum seeker in a Swedish detention centre about 20 years later. Thus the book commences. Chapter 1, “Accustomed soil”, sets the stage for the author’s own migration experience and journey into illegality. Here Khosravi is an Iranian young man, driven into a clandestine existence (to avoid certain death at war) much before he decided to flee the country. In this chapter the author highlights elements of choice in contexts of “forced” migration, refusing analyses that portray migrants as destitute of agency.

The following two chapters discuss issues of migrant illegality. Chapter 2, “Border guards and border people”, explores the author’s attempts to exit Iran and his life as an illegal migrant in Pakistan,

in transit to the West. His personal narrative is intertwined with reflections on the border, sacrifice, and the dehumanisation of border crossers. It is in Pakistan that Khosravi has his first asylum interview hearing prompting him to discuss matters of rights: while the law was available to him and others in similar circumstances, it was not accessible to them. From this chapter on the reader is introduced to, and gets acquainted with, the people who formed part of his journey: a series of individuals from varying backgrounds and positions who challenge stereotypical impersonations of the drug dealer, the human smuggler, the border guard, and the undocumented migrant. Chapter 3, “The community of displacement”, addresses the perils and dangers of fleeing to the West. These are coupled with the generosity and hospitality of many strangers the author encounters along his way – the importance of social networks and religion in the migration process are noted. Here Khosravi discusses too the arbitrariness of the illegal journey; how often the end destination, the routes, and experiences of border crossing are the result more of chance rather than choice. It is upon arrival in Sweden that Khosravi is made to feel shame over his illegality. The author ends the chapter emphasising how intensely the border can be felt. He becomes an asylum seeker subjected to questioning and surveillance.

In Chapter 4, “The invisible border”, the author’s standpoint changes once again, this time from “asylum seeker” into “refugee”. Here the issues of hospitality are grounded in a discussion of the invisible borders – the borders of the mind, elusive, unreachable, impossible to cross. The author’s account of his own experience and that of his informants as refugees and asylum seekers in Sweden reveals how invisible borders work to prevent the “unwanted” from belonging. Even if they have been

formally included, the “unwanted migrant” is forever a guest, a stranger in the domain of his host.

In Chapter 5, “Homelessness”, Khosravi returns to Iran to visit his family. His encounter with a young undocumented Afghan couple in his hometown makes him question the conceptualisation of the host/guest divide and its powerful rootedness in citizenship. Feeling alienated (not at home in Iran, not at home in Sweden) Khosravi discusses homelessness as a paradigm and a lifestyle suggesting that “only when *home* has vanished and humanity is no longer territorialised, only then, there will be a chance for humanity” (p. 96). The following chapter, “We borders”, takes further the discussion of the border. When returning to Sweden after travelling abroad, Khosravi, now a Swedish citizen, is constantly the subject of racial profiling at the border, pressured to “live up to his passport”. Borders are everywhere, the author contends when discussing the process of making borders of people: the unwanted are not just excluded at the border but are themselves “forced to be border” (p. 99). Again here the law is available but not accessible, and the reader becomes engaged in a discussion of the law as grounded in a world organised through nation-states thus excluding those who fall outside it. This discussion is taken further in Chapter 7, “Right to have rights”. Taking Derrida, Kant and Benhabib as key points of reference, hospitality is again questioned, and is presented as conditional. It is provided only for those who deserve, the “good productive migrants”. He describes migrants’ experiences as those of “hostile hospitality”.

Overall, when exploring how policies and the law are lived and experienced, Khosravi engages in an important field of study within anthropology and migration studies that does not divorce the migration experience from that of settlement,

underlining how the experience of border crossing does not end when the final destination is reached, but that the border is in fact more pervasive and intrusive than that. The book successfully conveys to the reader not only what it means to be “illegal” but how it feels to be one. Most importantly, Khosravi does so without essentialising the “illegal migrant” – the diversity and

multitude of situations and experiences of migrant illegality is present throughout the book. The fact that the book is written in the first voice only makes it the more powerful and engaging.

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