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A book and a film: Kurdish ruralness

This last June 2011, the publication of a special issue of *Études Rurales* on “Ruralness in Kurdistan”¹ (<http://www.cairn.info/revue-etudes-rurales-2010-2.htm>) was the occasion for an interesting social and cultural encounter in Paris.

The École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) inaugurated a new type of event that aimed at conjugating the common interests of the public for social science on the one hand and documentary cinema on the other. Thus, “un livre, un film” took place at the Kurdish Institute in Paris (IKP) in a fairly crowded reception hall. Since the beginning of the 80’s, IKP has been the paramount institution diffusing Kurdish culture in France. IKP is situated on Lafayette Street in the 10th district of Paris. In its library, as well as all the books on Kurdish culture, history and politics (in all European languages, Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Kurdish...), the private archives of some French Orientalists (Pierre Rondot, Roger Lescot, Thomas Bois) with an interest in this issue can be found. One of the most recent IKP projects has been the creation of a Kurdish digital library (<http://bnk.institutkurde.org/>). Before and after it was made an “association of public interest” (an association receiving funding from the French government), IKP not only organized symposiums, conferences on the Kurdish issue and culture, supported the publication of books on Kurdish politics, history, linguistics and gave fellowships to Kurdish students, but also aimed at granting legal support to Kurdish refugees in France as well as tracking and reporting human rights violations in the Kurdish regions of the Middle East.

This last activity was echoed in Claude Weisz’s film, shown at IKP June 4². In 1988, during the Iraq-Iran war, Saddam Hussein launched a military campaign (*Anfal*) against the Kurdish movement that indiscriminately targeted the local population. Approximately forty thousand Iraqi Kurds had to flee beyond the Turkish border and were confined in refugee camps. Some of these refugees (350) were accepted and transferred on French soil thanks to the intervention of the NGO “France-Liberté”, which was then managed by Danielle Mitterand, the wife of the French president. The Kurdish refugees were received in the buildings of a military base in Bourg-Lastic (Puy de Dôme). At that time, Claude Weisz was a renowned film director who had won many prizes mainly for his fiction movies. “Les Kurdes de Bourg-Lastic” describes the arrival of these Kurds in the French countryside. The euphoria of arrival in a land that was to become their land and the pain of exile is surfacing in the speeches of the traumatized newcomers interviewed by the film director. The latter shoots also the successful and failed encounters of these “strange” country people with the French local population, two ruralnesses meeting each other. The film ends with the interview, twenty years later, of some “characters” of the original drama. The striking image is one of French people living their life in their new country and sustaining an ambiguous relationship with their country of origin (Iraqi Kurdistan). All the Kurds who arrived in Bourg-Lastic in 1988 and who Weisz followed have a job today, speak fluently their “second language” (French) and although they are still very “Kurdish” were rather hesitant to return to their homeland when the situation allowed it after 2003. Beyond the Kurdish issue, this film raises quite optimistically the question of migrants’ integration, especially in times of strong suspicion towards fresh migration throughout the western world.

After the projection of Claude Weisz’s film, Joyce Blau, a co-founder of IKP and Agnes Belbezet (<http://www.editions.ehess.fr/menu/nous-contacter/>), the official responsible for EHESS Press’ communications, opened the debate in the presence of director Claude Weisz, supervisor of the special issue of *Études Rurales* on Ruralness in Kurdistan Clémence Scalbert-Yücel, and one of the contributors, Boris James. The purpose of this debate was to draw a link between the film and the themes addressed by *Études Rurales*’ joint publication (“Ruralness, urbanness and violence in

¹ Scalbert-Yücel, Clémence & Tejel-Gorgas, Jordi (dir.), Ruralité, urbanité et violence au Kurdistan, *Études Rurales*, n°186, Pp. 247.

² Weisz, Claude (2008), *Les Kurdes de Bourg-lastic*, Paris.

Kurdistan”). Although the main aspects emerging were the humanitarian and migration dimension, one could sense in the film what Jordi Tejel-Gorgas and Scalbert-Yücel have put forward in their collective issue. In 1988 most of the Kurdish population was rural and so were the refugees of Bourg-Lastic. The urbanisation that the whole Kurdish population has witnessed, the Kurds of Bourg-Lastic have encountered it through exile. The description of the refugees’ daily life in exile made this impression of transition more evident.

The discussion was also the pretext to develop on the book itself: ten articles dealing from a very broad historical perspective with the issue of the social and political articulation of ruralness and urbanness in the Kurdish regions. Often described in the scientific and militant literature as essentially rural, the Kurdish society experienced during the 20th century the effects of modernization and state violence. However, ruralness per se has never been at the centre of any study dealing with Kurdistan. In the first, historical part of the book, the authors evoke the constant and mutual flows linking during several centuries rural and urban world: Medieval in-betweenness (B. James), Kurdish-Armenian reshuffling during the Ottoman tanzimat (H.-L. Kieser), the marginal space of the Syrian Djezireh during the French mandate (J. Tejel-Gorgas). A second part treats more specifically the political violence that transformed deeply the Kurdish countryside through the 20th century: the village evacuations and reconstructions in Turkish Kurdistan (J. Jongerden), the urbanization of the Yezidis in Iraqi Kurdistan (E. Savelsberg & S. Hajo), the construction of a peripheral space in Iraqi Kurdistan (A. Fischer-Tahir), the destruction of agriculture in Iraqi Kurdistan (Y. Walliser).

Finally, a third part opens some research tracks to tackle the study of the spaces that were shaped by these transformations: exploring the religious resource in the Syrian Kurdish regions (P. Pinto), reconsidering the Kurdish migrations to Istanbul (J.-F. Pérouse), studying the image of rural Kurdish society in Kurmanji poetry in Turkey (C. Scalbert-Yücel). Many articles of this volume are based on the concepts of “in-betweenness”, “margin” and “mobility”, highlighting the contradiction between a tribal and mountainous representation of Kurdistan on the one hand, and the reality of permanent exchanges between cities and countryside, on the other hand. In addition to the information on this social and political space in constant mutation, the new approaches allow a richer analysis of the Kurdish society, that was previously often limited to the political and ethnic domain. The weak point of the book is that it skipped the Iranian part of the Kurdish world. However, the articles on Iraqi Kurdistan bear a real originality and a great value since the region is still quite unexplored by the scholars.

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