



## BOOK REVIEWS

Neighbours of Passage: A Microhistory of Migrants in a Paris Tenement, 1882–1932. By Fabrice Langrognet. London–New York: Routledge, 2022. 216 pp.

Fabrice Langrognet is authority to reckon with. He who holds a PhD from Cambridge, serves as a research scholar at several renowned institutions, and has had a career in the French government. His focus even during his volunteer work at a French NGO was migration and asylum law. His research deals primarily with the everyday lives of working-class migrants in the Paris area, and his most recent book, *Neighbours of Passage*, published as a part of Routledge's Microhistories Series and edited by Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szigártó, builds on this work. In this sociocultural microhistory of migrants living in a few buildings in the heart of Plaine-Saint-Denis, Langrognet offers glimpses of the struggles and identities of the inhabitants of this neighborhood as well as an overview of the world in which they live and interact with one another. Langrognet addresses the questions he raises at a level of complexity that is rarely achieved by historians of migration. While the subject of this book is very much French, the discussion goes beyond France. Langrognet's inquiry merits the attention of scholars of Central Europe as well, as he showcases fresh methodologies and shows the full potential of a microhistorical approach and also speaks about the current, often politicized topic of migration.

In his introduction, Langrognet lays down the fundamentals of this work. He uses a microhistorical approach in the hope of showing more intersectionality, nuance, and complexity than an average migration historian concentrating exclusively on the macro level. He also makes explicit his aspiration to correct grave errors found in the works by migration historians by righting such wrongs as presupposing the existence of bounded ethnic units, presuming national societies at both ends of the migration process, and lastly, concentrating on the macro levels of migration. Langrognet's methods are a mix of digital research drawing on judicial and police records, the press, records of municipal archives, and census records and the use of oral history. Based on this wide array of sources, he aims to answer at least two major questions of migration history: how and why did people migrate and how did the dynamics of sociocultural differences change over time as people moved? To summarize, as any good

microhistorical work aims to do so, Langrognet seeks to question hegemonic beliefs and mainstream narratives.

In the first chapter, titled “Setting the scene,” Langrognet acquaints his reader with the backdrop of his inquiry, calling attention to the different identification processes of the inhabitants. We get to know the surroundings and the specific tenements, down to the individual characteristics of the different buildings and the gradual decay of the tenement, which is due to many different factors. Using several different sources, Langrognet even offers metaphorical glimpses of the interiors of the tenement.

The second chapter concentrates on the social factors. In this chapter, Langrognet explains the major demographic features of the area, the change in health conditions in the timeframe under discussion, and the origins of the inhabitants of the area. He then offers some discussion of the most common occupations of the tenants and the average incomes. Thanks to diligent micro-research, he includes work performed by women, which is often missed or ignored by historians who rely too heavily on official censuses. Langrognet tries to reconstruct the division of labor between men and women based on photographs, though he presents his numerical findings as facts without mentioning the dubious reliability of such photographs as sources. He may have accounted for these methodological problems, but he offers no explanation of this for his reader.

Our individual protagonists return in the third chapter. Langrognet goes through the different motivations for migration. This is where microhistory absolutely shines. We see the individuals in this chapter, the methods they used to relocate, the length of their travels, and so on. Langrognet sometimes identifies the individuals by name and sometimes provides only their addresses, but he is careful not to deprive them of agency. They are portrayed as real actors and not used simply as illustrations. Langrognet uses this approach in the fourth chapter too, which shows the networks that brought new migrants into the community and explores different aspects of chain migration. Unfortunately, this subject is hijacked by a disproportionate focus on the role of child trafficking. As engaging and meticulous as these subchapters are, child trafficking is almost presented as the main form of chain migration at the expense of other important aspects, which brings an otherwise splendid first part of the book to a lackluster close.

The second section of the book opens with a lively image of a wedding, which provides an excellent introduction to an interesting experiment. Langrognet aims

to reconstruct the real scope of intergroup connections, especially marriages, without necessarily putting a distorted emphasis on ethnicity. In order to do this, he uses the distances between people's towns of birth as a metric. He points out that national identification was not the main factor for southern Italian migrants in marriage, for whom regional affinities were more important, whereas Spaniards preferred national ties. He neglects to mention that the very different national histories of the two source countries could easily explain this difference. He also examines aspects of people's cultural identities, such as jobs, beliefs, and spoken languages, which clearly reveal a great deal about the lives and social networks of the inhabitants of the tenement.

Life in the mixed world of the tenements was not free of conflict. The sixth chapter is dedicated to these confrontations. Drawing on police reports, judicial sources, and newspaper articles Langrognet shows that, at least to the extent that these sources reveal, interethnic conflicts were very rare in the tenement. Conflicts were much more common within closely-knit groups that were ethnically relatively homogenous. Langrognet also provides an in-depth analysis of an extraordinarily violent conflict that caught the attention of many journalists at the time. His approach is exceptional: he uses his sources to describe the motivations of the participants in the fights convincingly and to show that, while one might have assumed that ethnicity was the reason for the violence, this was not in fact the case.

Langrognet then showcases instances in which states and individuals negotiated problems of nationality. Though nationality was a clear-cut subject on paper, in practice, things were more complicated. When compiling census data in connection with military service or welfare benefits, state institutions did not rely on the simplistic images this kind of data tended to suggest. Langrognet again draws on accounts concerning the lives of people who lived in these communities, but this time, these figures serve as little more than illustrations. His conclusion is well supported, but this chapter remains underwhelming, as Langrognet makes no genuine effort to use the tools of microhistory to show intersectionality in all its complexity.

The last chapter is dedicated to the period of the Great War, which redrew the borders of people's understandings of nationality and put new limitations on their mobility. Langrognet examines the changing experiences of the residents of the tenements amidst a war, including changes in work opportunities and conditions, the transition from the front to the home country, and new waves of immigration from new sources. Though chronologically this is not the end of

the timeframe of this book, this editorial decision makes sense, as Langrognet can show this shift as the end of an era in this closing chapter.

The conclusion of the book begins with a glance towards the future of the tenement, up to the present day. The author then laments the methodological problems faced by the oral historian due to difficulties of recalling individual experiences and the unreliability of personal memory. Lastly, he confidently summarizes how he wishes, with this book, to inspire other scholars to mix microhistorical accounts and quantitative statistics-based research.

This monograph is not perfect. In some instances, it does not live up to its own expectations concerning the approach of microhistory, for instance when it fails to show the real agency of its actors. But this does not mean that *Neighbours of Passage* is not a great work. For the most part, Langrognet delivers what he promises in his introduction. He uses a wide array of sources very competently, and his arguments are always clear. As one would expect from a former speechwriter for the president of the French Republic, his style is eloquent. Langrognet has a way of painting vivid images, his reasoning is immersive, and the whole book is engaging. It will be intriguing and informative for anyone interested in microhistory, novel methods, and the always relevant questions surrounding migration.

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