

In Memoriam: Xavier de Planhol (1926-2016)



Iranian studies, and beyond that the cultural and historical geography of the Muslim world, lost a prominent personality with the death of Xavier de Planhol on 17 May 2016 in Paris at the age of ninety. Xavier Genestet de Planhol was born in Paris on 3 February 1926 and hardly ever attended school. Educated by his parents, he was sent to high school in 1940-41, when he was only fourteen years old, to obtain the *baccalauréat* and enter the university. He obtained his bachelor's degree in geography in 1943. Faithful to his nationalist education, he subsequently joined a resistance group against the German occupation and was wounded in battle. After the war, in 1946, he obtained the *agrégation* of History and Geography and then spent three years in Turkey at the French Institute of Archeology in Istanbul to prepare his doctoral thesis, titled "Peasants and Nomads between the Pamphilian Plain and the Pisidian Lakes," which he defended in 1956. In 1957 and 1958 he carried out two research missions in Iran, thus initiating a strong and lasting relationship with Iranian geographers.

He then joined the faculty of the University of Nancy, becoming full professor in 1960 at the age of only 34. He actively participated in the creation of the *Revue Géographique de l'Est*, where he edited the chronicle "Nomades et pasteurs," which was for nearly twenty years a reference on international studies dealing with nomadism not only for geographers but also for anthropologists and historians. As a professor at the Sorbonne since 1969, Xavier de Planhol supervised a large number of doctoral theses on the historical and cultural geography of France and on the Islamic world, including fifteen theses on the Iranian world.

His sojourns and fieldwork in the Middle East, his intellectual vivacity, his unlimited curiosity, combined with an exceptional bibliographic scholarship, allowed X. de Planhol to put forth an entirely original analysis of the geography of the Muslim world, which was the core of his academic work. *Les fondements géographiques de l'histoire de l'islam* (The Geographical Roots of the History of Islam), published in 1968 and translated into many languages, can be considered as the synthesis of an immense oeuvre which accords a primordial place to the *longue durée* and cultural heritages anchored in space, in the tradition of the historian Fernand Braudel.

In *Les nations du Prophète. Manuel géographique de politique musulmane* (The Nations of the Prophet: A Geographical Manual of Muslim Politics), which was published in 1993 but unfortunately has not yet been translated into English, the chapters on "Empire, Nationalities and Nation in Iran" and "Afghanistan or the Anti-Nation" (pp. 496-678) constitute some of the most sophisticated and original syntheses for an understanding of the foundations and strengths of Iranian nationalism. In his chapter on Iran, de Planhol shows how, by nature, Iran is nationalist but not imperialist.

Indeed, since earliest antiquity, irrigation by *qanāt* has allowed an agricultural prosperity that is unique in the world, linking the Iranians to their territory, an arid high plateau where the *qanāts* collect water from the mountains. The Iranian empires were only conquests, without lasting colonization. Iranian culture has been “exported” with the Arabo-Muslim expansion, but the Iranian nation has always remained centered on its territory protected by buffer zones. Such an analysis deserves to be taken seriously into account for an understanding of contemporary Iranian foreign policy that goes beyond appearances.¹ De Planhol emphasizes the originality of this Iranian world, which has preserved a specific identity linked to an early Islamization without Arabization, and has been marked by the lasting impact of the invasions of Turkish and then Mongol nomads on a territory of peasants who have been attached to their land and their *qanāts* and have formed islands of resistance to the expansion of the great nomadism, especially in the mountains (the myth of Alamut). As a member of the advisory committee of the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, he published numerous articles on the cities and provinces of Iran and Afghanistan.

The extraordinary scholarship of Xavier de Planhol on the Muslim world and the comparative history of civilizations can be found in *Les minorités en Islam. Géographie politique et sociale* (Minorities in Islam: Political and Social Geography, 1997), and perhaps finds its apogee in *L’Islam et la mer* (Islam and the Sea, 2000), where he shows how Islam conveys “by nature” a phobia of the sea which may explain why the Muslim peoples, who mastered the art of navigation long before the Christian West, did not discover America.

The other works of Xavier de Planhol on the historical geography of France, the geography of drinks (*L’eau de neige/Water Snow*) or the world’s fauna (*Le paysage animal*) confirm the exceptional curiosity of this atypical geographer, who was an heir of the great French geographical tradition of Vidal de la Blache. His analyses of the historical and cultural foundations of the Muslim world have deeply influenced the work of his students, but, as if to confirm the old saying that no one is a prophet in his own country, his ideas did not have the echo that one might have expected in France. Perhaps because his very erudite and not very mediatic academic work did not fit explicitly into the schools of thought and philosophical debates at work in the social sciences, perhaps also because this master was sometimes difficult to access—and perhaps because of the rivalry of some—Xavier de Planhol was never made a professor at the Collège de France, nor was he made a member of any of the national French academies. He was made a Knight of the Legion of Honor very late in life, and the Association of German Geographers awarded him its Grand Prize in 2015. Xavier de Planhol has left behind unfinished projects amounting to 1,000 handwritten papers, as well as memoirs that may provide additional insights on this outstanding scientific personality.

¹This ancient agricultural revolution was the subject of one of the last academic lectures of Xavier de Planhol, which he gave at the invitation of the research team “Monde Iranien” (CNRS) on 19 March 2009. It was published as “Le kārēz et la luzerne: une première révolution agricole en Iran,” in *Studia iranica* 39 (2010): 11-26.

Main Publications of Xavier de Planhol

An exhaustive bibliography of the works of Xavier de Planhol up until 2000 was published in a two-volume festschrift edited by Daniel Balland and titled *Hommes et terres d'islam. Mélanges offerts à Xavier de Planhol* (Men and the Lands of Islam: A Festschrift Offered to Xavier de Planhol), published by the Institut Français de Recherche en Iran/Peeters, Tehran-Louvain in 2000.

His most important publications include:

Recherches sur la géographie humaine de l'Iran septentrional [Studies on the Human, Geography of Northern Iran]. Paris: CNRS, 1964, 78 pages. Studies about the *qaʿeh*, Lārijān, Kelārdasht, and Tehran.

Les fondements géographiques de l'histoire de l'islam [The Geographical Roots of the History of Islam]. Paris: Flammarion, 1968, 442 pages. A first short version of this book was translated into English as *The World of Islam*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959.

Géographie historique de la France. Paris: Fayard, 1988, 635 pages (with Paul Claval). Translated into English as *An Historical Geography of France*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Les nations du Prophète. Manuel de géographie de politique musulmane [The Nations of the Prophet: A Geographic Manual of Muslim Politics]. Paris: Fayard, 1993, 894 pages.

L'eau de neige. Le tiède et le frais [Snow Water: The Warm and Cool]. Paris: Fayard, 1995, 474 pages.

Les minorités en islam, géographie politique et sociale [Minorities in Islam: Political and Social Geography]. Paris : Flammarion, 1997, 524 pages.

L'islam et la mer. La mosquée et le matelot VIIe XXe siècle [Islam and the Sea: The Mosque and the Sailor from the Seventh to the Twentieth Century]. Paris: Perrin, 2000, 658 pages.

Le paysage animal. L'homme et la grande faune: une zoogéographie historique [The Animal Landscape: Man and the Great Fauna: An Historical Zoogeography Paris]. Paris: Fayard, 2004, 1127 pages.

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