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The Persistence of the Old Regime in Morroco

by Antoine Perrier

How can one explain the longevity of the Moroccan monarchy? In their long-term study of the imaginary of the Moroccan state, Béatrice Hibou and Mohamed Tozy argue that it is due to the regime's ability to adapt its dual—imperial and national—logic to the realities of the neoliberal age.

About: Béatrice Hibou and Mohamed Tozy, *Tisser le temps politique au Maroc. Imaginaire de l'État à l'âge néolibéral*, Paris, Karthala, 2020, 660 p., 35 €.

The Moroccan monarchy continues to arouse the interest of anthropologists, historians, and sociologists, who have been trying to unlock the secret of its longevity for well over a hundred years. This secret, it is claimed, lies in part in the national specificity of a state whose archaic mysteries are encapsulated in its very name: *Makhzen*, literally "the storehouse." In a book based on nearly three decades of field research, Béatrice Hibou and Mohamed Tozy renew these long-standing questions by proposing to approach the Moroccan state through its "imaginary," a concept central to their analysis.[1] Seeking to overcome the dualism between "tradition" (the

[1] Hibou and Tozy define the imaginary as an articulation between « behaviors and values »: language, body postures, interpersonal skills, social relationships, etc.

Makhzenian state of the sultans) and "modernity" (the bureaucratic state born with colonialism), the authors offer a series of case studies that mobilize Weberian categories of analysis in order to identify the "ideal-types" and "horizons of thought" of a myriad of actors.

Through historical examples and field observations, the authors uncover, in the spirit of a public policy, the motivation for a loyalty, or the meaning of a ceremony, the same tension between two logics that have structured the Moroccan state: the logic of the nation-state, with its ideal of cohesion and homogeneity, on the one hand, and the logic of the imperial state, associated with different territorial loyalties, mobile power, and personalized relationships, on the other. *Tisser le temps politique au Maroc* (Weaving Political Time in Morocco) builds on the new imperial history and the "politics of difference" paradigm (J. Burbank and F. Cooper): This book, written by a sociologist and a political scientist, stems from a close scrutiny of the history of the *Makhzen*.

The *Makhzen* and Its Past

This diachronic ambition underpins the metaphor of weaving, which consists in identifying traces of certain past motifs in the present. One of the book's central arguments lies among these knots: The exceptionally consensual acclimatization of neo-liberalism in Morocco over the last forty years can be explained by a sense of doctrinal *déjà vu*. Structural adjustment policies have taken the form of loose ties between the state and society similar to those that existed during the reign of the sultans.

Distancing themselves somewhat from the "corporation" of historians (p. 37), the authors engage in a back-and-forth between the present and the past. The first chapter is more clearly historical: Boldly entitled "Prolegomena" (like the "*Muqaddimah*" of the *Book of Examples*, in which Ibn Khaldūn offered fourteenth-century readers one of his most brilliant theories of history), this chapter includes analyses of several letters written by nineteenth-century sultans, all of them drawn from printed sources. In the light of this correspondence, the state appears to have been either omnipresent, managing society down to the smallest details, or, on the contrary, distant and erratic, depending on the proximity of the territories over which it had to exercise its authority. Sultan Hassan I (1873-1894), one of the most remarkable

sovereigns of his century, combined the energy of a nation-state leader with the pragmatism of a mobile emperor who assembled throughout his travels distant territories by means of negotiation.

While the nature of the documents—the sultans' letters, which constitute an abundant source and have been edited multiple times by Moroccan historians—implies a self-presentation bias on the part of the *Makhzen*, the descriptions of historical situations do have great conceptualizing power. The pages on the protectorate, based on secondary sources, are less engaging. Yet, the book is mainly concerned with the reinvention of tradition by the modern monarchy—with the focus placed on the reign of King Hassan II (r. 1961-1999), who drew on a wide range of imperial logics to better assert himself in the rivalry, typical of nation-states, between the throne and political parties.

When, during the Green March of 1975, Hassan II led a procession of 350,000 people towards the Sahara to remind Moroccans and the world that the region was an integral part of the Kingdom, he employed, as had his ancestor Sultan Hassan I, an "engineering of mobility" (p. 106) aimed at bringing the margins back into the imperial fold. According to Hibou and Tozy, the extreme violence that the king expressed in his speeches, the curse cast on entire families in which only one member was guilty of treason, evoked the natural fear (*ḥayba*) that caliphal power had inspired in the past. Here again, the book highlights King Hassan II's formidable inventiveness and the strong impact he had on Moroccan political life. However, it does not confine itself to an overview of well-known analyses of independent Morocco, but draws on an Arabic-language historiography that has generally been ignored in France. Unlike what a hasty reading of colonial sources or dated French-language historiography would suggest, nineteenth-century Morocco was not synonymous with the failure of an impossible nation-state. On the contrary, it was an inventive period that saw the development of new political practices.

The King's Game

This dazzling interplay of different logics often follows the same pattern, wherein the institutions of Morocco, a country now bureaucratized and integrated into the capitalist economy, remain subjected to royal intervention. Such intervention has nothing to do with a conservative reaction; rather, it consists of balancing innovations

so as to acclimatize them to a political environment that had remained surprisingly stable over the last decades.

The regime's resistance to the post-2011 revolutionary wave is a case in point: Unlike the situation in neighboring Algeria, this resistance has not entailed the rejection of elections or constitutional reforms, even though these have remained under tight control. Alongside officials elected by universal suffrage, the king has continued to appoint people to important positions in representative bodies of civil society, which he has justified by his longstanding knowledge of the myriad communities making up his empire, or else in the powerful administration, thus "sheltering from electoral risk" his most loyal agents (p. 143). The old practice of intercession (*chfa'a*, in Moroccan dialect) has remained in place, coexisting with the electoral mandate: As civil servants appointed by the king, territorial governors continue to present the interests and demands of their subjects before the monarchy.

Royal intervention has also blurred the lines in the economic sphere: The Tangier Free Zone project launched in the late 1990s was, no doubt, a classic attempt at integrating a long-neglected region through mobilizing the resources offered by global liberalism. Yet, it was the royal will that accelerated the construction works and that brought together public and private actors to ensure the project's success—a success further guaranteed by Mohammed VI's selection of the project location and by the permanent presence of his advisors in the governing bodies of the free zone.

Several cases presented in the book—from the mobile telephony market to the *Office Chérifien des Phosphates*—shed light on this combination of imperial and liberal logics made possible by the king's personal presence. Proximity to the king being considered the most precious currency in the Moroccan economy, the support of the palace has helped to accelerate the implementation of a policy—as occurred with the housing policy under Hassan II—or to improve the lot of a specific segment of the population through the intermediary of a royal foundation.

Thus, few national, homogeneous public policies have been put in place; the existing ones have been undermined by the regime's investment in a territory or cause—for instance, the disputed Sahara, which uses one-third of the budget earmarked for the purchase of equipment and the fight against unemployment, even though it is home to only 3% of the population (p. 346). Furthermore, royal intervention is only effective because it is rare; long-term actions—such as the fight against corruption—have much lower chances of success. While the king does shelter individuals grouped under his "parasol" (the emblem of his ancestors, p. 186), his

protégés are always under the threat of disgrace. Such absences of the state are not due to weakness, but to a strategy that reconciles old imperial habits with the capitalist demands of the day.

Servant Lives

The book does not focus solely on the center of authority: The *Makhzen*, "a site of production of behaviors, know-how, values, and arts of governing" (p. 15), also serves as a lens into behaviors and provides the opportunity for lively portraits of men (more rarely women) who have inherited a "common imaginary." Technocrats, engineers, and senior civil servants speak about efficiency and New Public Management like all their Western counterparts, but they also see the palace as the ultimate source of their legitimacy, even as they live in fear of "royal wrath." The members of bourgeois civil society are distancing themselves more and more from the state, believing that they can handle social issues through their charity activities. The Islamists, in power from 2012 to 2019, are also committed to charity, which they equate with social stability. Fiscal rigor and the work ethic, two neo-capitalist dogmas, are consistent with their conservative interpretation of Islam.

The portraits are of uneven thickness, but in the midst of them, a few remarkable pages are devoted to a figure that is decisive in Moroccan society yet is little known outside it: the *muqaddam*. Literally "the one who is in front," this state auxiliary is simultaneously responsible for public order and security and located at the state's margins. Although not officially a civil servant, the *muqaddam* remains on the border between the formal and the informal.

The book recounts a day in the life of a *muqaddam*: Si Rajji, the country *muqaddam*, carries a satchel—a symbol of "the link between the state and citizens" (p. 360)—containing letters from urban migrants to their parents, summonses from the gendarmerie, and death or birth certificates. He keeps track of everything—as does his counterpart Youssef, the city *muqaddam*, in Casablanca. Youssef keeps watch by relying on the building guards posted in every street (a Moroccan institution), and strives to find out what is going on before everyone else ("his day never ends, because he can be called upon at any moment," p. 364). Situated at the crossroads of several logics, the *muqaddams* are both a sign of the state's weakness, as their meager salaries remind them, and the agents of its effectiveness: against terrorists in the past, against

the coronavirus recently. During the epidemic, *muqaddams* were tasked with signing travel authorizations and tracking down those who refused to be vaccinated.

The book's sophisticated theoretical apparatus rarely descends to the level of social history and, therefore, of the protests of underprivileged classes. The plight of the poor is nevertheless reflected in the often brilliant chapter conclusions: Similar to nineteenth-century sultans in the face of famines, the king is not responsible for lifting his people out of poverty, even though he displays occasional kindness and defends the principle of charity. The coexistence of institutional violence and lack of public responsibility has led to diffuse social anger and mistrust, which sometimes turn the most ordinary activities (choosing an outfit, buying a bottle of wine, etc.) into a major ordeal (p. 266).

The Demise of a World?

Curiously, the book does not directly address the religious ideology of the regime, most likely because it seeks to distance itself from a long anthropological tradition that has likened the king to a marabout sanctified by virtue of his genealogy and has reduced all his exceptions to his status as commander of the faithful. Nevertheless, the rich Arabic-language references include powerful analyses that further enrich the inventory of modes of imperial government: The sultan justified all operations to restore order by the fight of the "good religion" (*al-dīn al-ṣāliḥ*) against tribes left in "ignorance" (pre-Islamic *jāhiliyya*),[2] and some subjects placed their hopes for a good harvest in the sultan, as they were convinced of his magical ability to command the clouds and rain.[3] That these signs have become obsolete shows how much the Moroccan monarchy has changed compared to past centuries.

The book provides an innovative and stimulating overview of the Moroccan regime, without culminating in an easy narrative of the eternal *Makhzen*: On the contrary, the fortress appears to be cracking and the nineteenth century is receding from view. Roads are being built, reducing the distances between territories, rural

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[2] *ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Muddan, Al-bawādiʿ al-maġribiyya qabl al-istiʿmār, qabāʾil Ināwan wa-l-Maḫzan bayn al-qarn al-sādis ʿašar wa-l-tāsiʿ ʿašar*, Rabat, Publications de la Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines, 1995, p. 242.

[3] *Muḥammad al-Amīn Al-Buzzāz, Tārīḫ al-awbiʾa wa-l-maǧāʿāt bi-l-maġrib fī-l-qarnayn al-ṯamīn ʿašar wa-l-tāsiʿ ʿašar*, Rabat, Université Mohammed V, 1992, p. 361.

exodus and immigration are undoing the traditional ties whose knowledge once constituted a rule of government, and the administration is becoming more feminized, including the old profession of '*adoul* (Muslim notary). The conclusion even evokes the gradual disappearance of the virtuosos of imperial government, who find themselves reduced under the current reign to a "minority of 'prelates' on the way to extinction" (p. 581). And yet, the book itself shows that the *Makhzen* is renewing itself behind this apparent demise. At times, the authors succumb to the lure of establishing a continuity between past and present that is reduced to nominal analogies (senior civil servants and top private-sector executives are described as the "new *khadims* [servants] of a renewed *Makhzen*," p. 531), but the book nevertheless draws its strength from the historical depth given to an observation that has been made by social scientists for years: Both the political regime and neoliberal institutions profit from the weakness or absence of social policy.

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