

Review – Globalizing Morocco: Transnational Activism and the Postcolonial State

Written by Blanca Camps-Febrer

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Globalizing Morocco: Transnational Activism and the Postcolonial State

David Stenner

Stanford University Press, 2019

History is a cruel companion. Most of the time, it magnifies, shuns, or grotesquely reshapes the lives and accomplishments of those that helped write events. The inescapable judgment of the present eye can only partially be fought by the continuous collection of shifting standpoints. North American historian David Stenner does exactly that in his book *Globalizing Morocco: Transnational Activism and the Postcolonial State*. Through the tools of network analysis and thoroughly documented research, Stenner traces and links the biographical trajectories of key figures of the Moroccan global nationalist campaign during the 1940s and 1950s. What emerges is a fresh account of the behind-the-scenes transnational strategies, the personal contacts tactfully and skillfully built by the leaders of the nationalist movement. Brokers, facilitators or bridges, whether Moroccan or foreigners: the resulting story is sometimes surprisingly entertaining and filled with unexpected characters that at some point became passionate and invested contributors to the Moroccan cause.

Five global cities

The first chapter of the book takes us to Tangier in the 1940s. The international status of the city granted possibilities and relative freedoms to anticolonial activists and provided an atmosphere of network-building opportunities between Spanish- and French-zone nationalists as well as with foreigners. It was in Tangier where the National Front was formed in 1951 between the two biggest nationalist parties, the Party of National Reform (PNR) and the Independence Party or *Istiqlal* (IP), and smaller movements like *Hizb al Wahda al Maghribiyya* (Party of Moroccan Unity) and *Hiz al Islah al Watani* (Party of the National Reform).

It is when Stenner centers his focus on the US connection that the book becomes most interesting and original. Here is where his analysis is thicker in detail. After the 1942 Operation Torch, the US prowess and relevance grows in Morocco, especially compared to the relative weakness of France (el-Mustafa, 1995). US military, political and economic assets are increasingly seen as potential allies to the nationalist cause. It is in Tangier where Abdellatif Sbihi co-founds the Roosevelt Club in 1946, a US-themed gathering between nationalists and North-American delegates – through Stenner’s account we even learn that ‘mint tea and cakes’ were served (p.24). The rich number of colorful details feels almost like the narration of a spy movie. The case of former rebellious intelligence officer turned Coca-Cola executive Kenneth Pendar best illustrates this. Coca-Cola’s rapid implantation in French Morocco went as far as to provide corporate sponsoring of Sidi Mohammed Ben Youssef in the Feast of the Throne (the company’s board included nationalists and members of the royal family). In 1952, Coca-Cola even sponsored the celebration of the PNR’s returned exiled leaders Abdelkhalek Torres and Mehdi Bennouna. It was the business approach that convinced some of the key American figures to support the cause, as their interests came to be in direct personal convergence with the urban bourgeoisie, the strongest and most important base of the *Istiqlal* Party. US policy would remain torn between the need for a stable North Africa, cordial relations with France, and the pursuit of liberal and commercial interests.

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Nationalist activists quickly seized the strategic importance of befriending foreigners with very different positions from anthropologists, diplomats, or journalists such as Margaret Pope and Nina Eptone, who would reach audiences outside Morocco. But the most fascinating character, certainly to Stenner, is that of Rom Landau, writer and journalist turned global expert and academic, and a very close friend of Morocco's monarchist nationalists. All these foreign allies would become contributors to the nationalist cause and amplify through media or personal connections the cause abroad in Europe, the Middle East and the Western Hemisphere.

The second chapter takes us to Cairo. In 1938, the Spanish protectorate had founded the *Casa de Marruecos (Bayt al-Maghrib)* in the city. Helped by a short-sighted francoist Arab policy, PNR leaders arrived in Cairo in 1946 to represent the Spanish protectorate at the newly created Arab League, but seized the opportunity to gather support for the nationalist cause. In February 1947, they established the *Maktab al-Maghrib al-'Arabi* (Office of the Arab Maghrib), an alienating name for Amazigh populations. Through a panarabist narrative, the nationalists active in the city weaved a network of religious and political supporters in the country. They also found the support of Iraq and of the first Arab League's Secretary General Abderrahman Azzam Pasha, who remained an indispensable ally at the UN years later.

The Cairo analysis illustrates the fact that building those networks with key supporters proved to be a double-edged strategy. While the flexibility of informal and personal relations could be rewarding to the cause, a change in political winds could potentially destroy carefully crafted power relations. The tide did turn with the 1952 regime change in Egypt, and it weakened the Moroccan nationalists' successful advances in the Middle East. Nasser's Egypt supported arms and military training for the Moroccans, but no strong political support could be expected. Nasser was not interested in antagonizing France and was especially averse to the non-revolutionary approach of Moroccan nationalists. The result was a shattering of the carefully built network of alliances among elites in Cairo, and an unwelcoming atmosphere, especially given previous Istiqlalis' relations to the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the third chapter, Stenner turns to Paris. In the colonial metropole, the Istiqlal puts its energy in cultivating Fourth Republic elites while enticing the mass of Moroccan workers and students present in the hexagon. Through the *Bureau de Documentation et Information du Parti de l'Indépendance*, Moroccan nationalists cultivated relations with key French political elites, paving the way for the National Assembly's support for negotiations with the sultan in 1955. At the center of the activism in the metropole was Ahmed Alaoui, a controversial figure of the Istiqlal whose work with the French press and as a well-connected lobbyist seems to have been protected by his role as informant for the French authorities.

In the fourth chapter, Stenner meticulously chronicles the first months of Mehdi Bennouna in New York. Bennouna had been sent to build support for the Moroccan cause among UN delegates. The tactics of the Moroccan Office of Information and Documentation taking special care with regards to Jewish lobbies and to dissociate the Moroccan struggle from any anti-Zionist movements show a very pragmatic positioning. The nationalists' work in New York sees a lukewarm outcome in 1952, when the UN General Assembly adopts a bland resolution on the question of Morocco (A/RES/612(VII)), nevertheless contributing to the popularization of the issue across US media, think tanks and some Washington officials.

Rabat is the last stop of the journey, the homecoming, as Stenner puts it in his fifth chapter. Most characters that we have encountered during the narration will appear again in the post-independence construction of the state. Many of them gladly range behind the monarchy, and others are cleverly coopted by the Sultan, or 'ambassadorized' to represent Morocco in distant unthreatening positions, weakening the Istiqlal's leadership at home. Stenner's network analysis visually illustrates the sultan's swift move in the appendix of the book. The network visualizations that emerge in Rabat are astonishingly enlightening, from a diversified and complex network of actors where Balafrej, Al-Fassi or Ben Aboud stand out in March 1956 (p.212), to an almost perfect centripetal web less than two years later where the only node that stands at the center is the Sultan M. ben Youssef (p.213).

Antirevolutionary Internationalism: the class factor

The argument of the book – that networking tactics were an essential factor in the globalization and facilitation of the

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anticolonial struggle – needs nuances. Transnational networking was indeed an indispensable tool, but it did not really differ in its mechanics from the tactics of Algerian activists, for instance (Mokhtefi, 2020). What differs, in fact, are political and ideological positions (and thus the potential alliances), geostrategic interests, and the nature of the European colonial project from where they emerged. Ultimately, the century long settler colonialism in Algeria had obliterated the power of Algerian traditional elites (Bustos & Mañé, 2009). In contrast, Morocco's nationalists “shared a class background that inoculated them against any notion of radical change” and, moreover, “they wanted to regain their rightful social status” (p.14–15). Their ideology and their connection to global actors was indeed as pragmatic as it was driven by class and their position in Morocco's history.

The success of key brokers and alliances of strategic networks for the nationalist campaign is a consequence of tactics, but also of an honest positioning of nationalists in favor of the West-leaning, elite-focused moderate project for Morocco: an antirevolutionary internationalism (p.14) that coincides with the leaders' class interests. Part of the key success of Moroccan nationalism, especially in the USA, was its anticommunist narrative that directly played on the idea that communism had been imported by France to North Africa (el-Mustafa, 1995).

Stenner's reading of the 1940s and 1950s connects with the long-debated issue of agency versus structure. The danger is that of understanding history as a string of personal and pretty much rational decisions by some nationalist actors. Stenner is aware of this (as I discussed with the author), and of the geostrategic and socio-political factors behind the global nationalist campaign. Still, the benefit of explicitly focusing on agency is, as Stenner notes, that it provides new tools that can rescue central figures and stories with decisive influence in historical outcomes of the transnational campaign.

Stenner's enticing book is about the globalizing strategy of the anticolonial struggle and it succeeds in masterfully showing the international networks of supporters that closely cooperated with Istiqlal and the nationalist movement. The amount of work behind this documentation effort – working with personal untold trajectories, ordinary details of apparently ordinary people – cannot be overstated. They make this book an important contribution to the history of nationalism in Morocco, especially to US-Moroccan history.

This is a book that one enjoys reading, as much as one feels the author enjoyed researching and writing it. It is always amusing to read about the eccentric stunts of free-riding journalists and artists that pullulated North Africa in the first years of the Cold War. The visualizing tools that network analysis provides are also an enriching contribution to historiography, and an excellent example of how new techniques can shed light on obscured elements of the past. The book indeed opens ground and proposes tools that might be picked up by others, since many interesting connections are left unexplored or only mentioned in passing – networks with workers and other left-leaning solidarity campaigns, but also with French business and political elites. With this book, Stenner adds a new dimension to the history of Morocco's independence struggle, zooming in on key actors that might have fallen under the radar of historians or political scientists for their informal but impactful positions. After all, personal accounts and the hazardous elements of life may somehow humble the stern structuralists among us.

About the author:

Blanca Camps-Febrer is a political scientist and PhD Fellow at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. She is currently researching the historical evolution of the public and private security sectors in Morocco. She has taught at different universities and specializes in critical security studies in the North of Africa and West Asia.