

Hassan Rachik: “Le proche et le lointain: Un siècle d’anthropologie au Maroc”

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Book Reviewed

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During the 1960s and 70s, Morocco became what Mohamed Tozy has rightly called “the last anthropological concession.” The phrase could not be more fitting given the anthropological scramble for the country during this period. Indeed, this anthropological interest in Morocco, which dates back to the late nineteenth century, became a trend in a brand of anthropology directed at remote geographies.

There are, however, structural factors that could explain this anthropological fascination with Morocco. Moroccan traditional practices survived the Jacobin colonial administration, arousing further anthropological curiosity about the country. Besides, Morocco, unlike other sites, was a country where anthropological investigation could be conducted without much political restriction.

Ever since the 1980s and more specifically the 1990s, the academic scene in Morocco has witnessed the emergence of “local” anthropologists who read, reread, and scrutinized anthropological knowledge produced on Morocco, thereby triggering a debate on the status of the “local anthropologist” and his/her interaction with those anthropologists who produced scholarship on Moroccan culture and society. This interaction of the observed with the observer gave rise to an underlying

tension that was in some respects informed by tools and concepts from fields of study such as Orientalism, ethnocentrism, and Eurocentrism as well as Subaltern Studies. However, due to an interesting generational effect, this tension has been defused to a certain extent.

In his latest book *Le proche et le lointain*, Hassan Rachik analyses and interprets a century of anthropological discourse on Morocco, and chooses to defuse the tension through the lens of the sociology of knowledge. He mainly examines the long twentieth century as an object for his ethnographic investigation in order to analyze how anthropologists observed Moroccans. As an anthropologist living in Morocco, he aims to “interpret, [...] what has been written about Moroccans, their character, their soul, their mentality, and their ethos.” He thus considers how foreign anthropologists as observers have built general propositions, attributing common traits to Moroccans as a whole. Much of the book is devoted to the anthropologists and travelers during the pre-colonial (De Foucauld, Mouliéras, Salmon, Michaux-Bellaire, Douuté and Westermarck), colonial (Laoust, Montage, Brunot, Hardy and Berque) and postcolonial periods (Gellner, Hart, Waterbury, Geertz). References in the book draw upon close readings of their published works.

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As the title of the book suggests, in *Le proche et le lointain*, Rachik shuttles between what is 'close' and what is 'distant' while positioning himself as a Moroccan anthropologist based in Morocco. He clearly points out that a 'native' position could sometimes constitute a constraint in the study of one's own culture and society. By describing the conditions affecting the processes of knowledge production by these authors, Rachik further asserts that the production of the anthropological discourse depends mainly on academic standards rather than political factors. This particular insight is, in itself, a deconstruction of the essentialism that informs both colonial and nationalist approaches in dealing with the anthropological legacy.

As such, Rachik's work has much to offer scholarship in a variety of ways. The notion of "ethnographic situation" is a substantial

theoretical contribution; it is a notion which carries several dimensions such as fieldwork duration and proficiency in local languages. The author does not try to prioritize or single out the best ethnographic situation, but instead to see what any such situation could possibly allow for in terms of the degree or range of observation. For instance, a traveler who does not speak local language would interact less with people but would be more inclined, given the situation, to favor external description of housing, clothing, weapons, and other accessories.

Le proche et le lointain also examines anthropological generalizations with regard to mind, character or soul. Rachik shows how these generalizations are constructed and what their limits are. Geertz and other American anthropologists, for example, in their descriptions of some situations char-

acterized by bargaining, as is the case with traditional souks, conclude that the Moroccan is a negotiator.

Unlike some postmodernist researchers, Rachik does not reject generalizations. He warns of binary oppositions and extreme positions, whether these relate to culturalist generalizations or denial of any generalization, for that matter. Rachik is in support of a conditional generalization; that is to say, a generalization which explicitly outlines sociological and cultural conditions of its relevance.

This book goes beyond the limits of a country to be part of a comprehensive history of anthropology as a discipline. It is a theoretical contribution to the understanding of the evolution of anthropological perspectives on the culture of the Other, a reflection on the near and the distant.

Works Cited

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