



Workshop 04

‘Provincializing Europe’? Towards a Local History of Maghribi Modernity

directed by

James McDougall

SOAS, UK

jm56@soas.ac.uk

Etty Terem

Rhodes College, USA

tereme@rhodes.edu

Workshop abstract

During the nineteenth century, the states of the Maghrib found themselves engaged in a struggle for survival in an increasingly hostile world where the rules of relative equality and reciprocity which had long characterised the Mediterranean were suddenly rewritten to their detriment. Maghribi states underwent a profound series of reforms and transformations with significant repercussions on their structures and capacities and on the nature of state-society relations. As the twentieth century progressed, the consolidation of colonial regimes and their destruction, restructuring, or reinvention of pre-existing state forms, their introduction of new practices and prerogatives of the state, wrought even greater shifts in the region’s systems of governance and their relation to Maghribi societies.

This workshop will explore the concrete historical content of this period, focusing on the specific local nature of the large-scale processes (subsumed under the notion of a ‘passage to modernity’) that shaped the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in North Africa. We envisage revisiting the experiences of the construction of modernity in the region, in both its long-term continuities and its sometimes sudden transformative dimensions, as the product of locally grounded histories that cannot be adequately captured by the simplifying scheme of ‘European impact’ and ‘Middle Eastern response’. In this sense, the workshop will seek to pursue the agenda of ‘provincialising Europe’ by

viewing the local construction of Maghribi modernity as the complex, dialogical working-out of local struggles to meet the demands of a world under stress, in crisis, and yet managing to survive.

Workshop description

The French landing at Algiers in 1830 did not affect Algeria alone. It was not long before the shock waves were felt in Morocco, to the west, and Tunisia and Libya, to the east. As external pressures on the Maghrib mounted in the second half of the nineteenth century, the region's states found themselves engaged in a struggle for survival in an increasingly hostile world where the rules of relative equality and reciprocity in commerce, inter-state relations, and power-projection which had long characterised the Mediterranean were suddenly rewritten, unilaterally, to their detriment. In their drive to survive, the Maghribi states underwent a profound series of reforms and transformations that had significant repercussions on their structures and capacities and on the nature of state-society relations. In Morocco, Tunisia and Libya, the state apparatus was largely reorganized. The army, the government, the financial and legal systems, land tenure, provincial administration, education and infrastructure underwent continuous changes. As the nineteenth century entered its last quarter, the states of the Maghrib permeated levels in society they had not reached before. As the twentieth century progressed, the consolidation of colonial regimes and their destruction, restructuring, or reinvention of pre-existing state forms, as well as their introduction of new practices and prerogatives of the state, wrought even greater shifts in the region's systems of governance and their relation to Maghribi societies.

The proposed workshop intends to come to grips with Maghribi modernity as reflected in the major transformations, whether state-designed or, perhaps even more so, unintended, of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The notion of a 'passage to modernity' in the Maghrib (as in the global south more broadly) has long been a key organising principle for narratives of the period under discussion. As research on colonialism, empire, and the meanings of 'modernity' has become more detailed and refined, the 'project of modernity' once assumed as an unproblematic, linear trajectory is no longer seen as a simple imitation of a normative (and idealised) Western model by 'backward' or static societies and 'despotic' or monolithic states. Rather, the experience of colonial modernity can be located in historical synthesis between new concepts and institutions and pre-existing methods and practices; the limits and conservatism as well as the violence and transformation of colonial rule have become more apparent, and the creative inflections of colonial systems by local societies, the resilient adaptability of social structures and interests, show through the more obvious, but misleading, oppositions of 'coloniser' and 'colonised'. The Maghrib's modern states were not built, either by colonial 'rational government' or, later, by national independence, on a tabula rasa.

Although clearly much was new, in many respects this period saw the continuation of processes of change and transformation that had begun in the eighteenth century.

It is the concrete historical content of these changes – the mechanisms that generated them, their specific local nature, and the meaning of widely used categories such as modernity and premodernity – that requires investigation. How are we to understand this era? What was the nature of these far-reaching changes? In what ways were they different from previous reforms and transformations, despite some similarities and much continuity?

In the past few decades some significant steps have been taken in the direction of revising our understanding of Maghribi history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet a fragmented intellectual environment has persisted between disciplines and periods, in particular between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, between Ottoman/early modern/pre-colonial, and colonial history, and across ‘area’ lines, with the Maghrib as a coherent focus sometimes disappearing in the gaps between African, Middle Eastern/Islamic, Mediterranean and European studies. This has often impeded the kind of sustained scholarly exchange that might provide a genuinely critical and properly integrated approach to this crucial set of questions for the region as a whole. (Compare, for example, the much more systematic work that has now been done on the Arab Middle East or the late Ottoman empire, let alone South and Southeast Asia). In this context, we strongly believe that scholars of North Africa would benefit enormously from more intensive interaction around these questions. The Mediterranean Research Meeting is an ideal venue to explore the interconnections between the questions which historians, anthropologists and sociologists ask, the presuppositions on which these questions are based, and the kinds of sources they have used. In particular, we envisage revisiting the experiences of the construction of modernity in the region, in both its long-term continuities and its sometimes sudden transformative dimensions, as the product of locally grounded histories that can no longer (indeed, never could) be adequately captured by the simplifying scheme of ‘European impact’ and ‘Middle Eastern response’. In this sense, the workshop will seek to pursue the agenda (not, in our view, satisfactorily followed through in Chakrabarty’s much-discussed work) of ‘provincialising Europe’ by viewing the local construction of Maghribi modernity neither as a (relatively unsuccessful) dimension of a global, Europe-centred teleology, nor as an ‘alternate’ modernity (conceived within the frame of a still-normative European rationality), but as the complex, dialogical working-out of local struggles to meet the demands of a world under stress, in crisis, and yet managing to survive.