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Abdelilah Bouasria, *Sufism and Politics in Morocco: Activism and Dissent*, Routledge, 2015, 240 pp., \$148.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781138776111.

Sufism and Politics in Morocco: Activism and Dissent outlines an ambitious argument that posits the absence of politics in the Moroccan Sufi Boutchichi order *to be* a political gesture in its own right. Abdelilah Bouasria challenges a scholarly consensus that has read the Boutchichi movement's self-articulation as dogmatically conformist to *al Makhzen* establishment. He concedes that by unraveling its mystifying veiled system of what the author labels as *kryptopolitics*, one may appreciate the relevance of esoteric knowledge and "paranormal register" as fully fledged "discourses" of political expression and virile engagement. Dreams, stories, rituals, prayers, symbols, food imagery, coded songs, rosary, portraits of the Saint, and many other cryptic elements of the Botchichi lexicon of divination have usually escaped the typologies and axiomatic analytical procedures of political scientists. Drawing selectively on Michel Foucault and James Scott, Bouasria tells us that Sufis mobilize their "hidden transcripts" to resist the oppression of their masters. A seemingly subordinate group inscribes its symbolic insurgency *in spite of* modernity itself; it responds to authoritarianism by means of "infra-politics."

Accordingly, kryptopolitics "mixes the politics of time with that of eternity and blurs the line between earthly transcripts and godly ones" (3). The quietist, Quaker-like, Boutchichi movement is compared with the politically vocal movement Al Adl wa Ihssane (AWI) led by Abdessalam Yassine, an ex-disciple of the Boutchichis. Bouasria's thesis argues against one of the most "authoritative" studies on Sufism, which has historically and anthropologically linked Sufism to political impotence, and to authoritarianism in Moroccan political culture. Abdellah Hammoudi explains, "My study of the cultural foundations of Moroccan authoritarianism shows how they were historically elaborated in struggles for the real. There is no philosophical foundationalism involved here, or any assumption of trans-historical 'cultural frames' divorced from action and creation."¹ In other words, Bouasria's argument promises to excavate the more subtle moves of Sufi concealed political consciousness. For this purpose, he employs multiple methodologies including ethnographic analysis and historiographical review. His argument is based on interviews, participant observation, primary data, and unpublished manuscripts of both movements. Despite some timid allusions to "an almost Freudian relationship" between the Saint and the Sultan, the author

¹ Abdellah Hammoudi, *Master and Disciple: The Cultural Foundations of Moroccan Authoritarianism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), vii-viii.

has remained closer to historiography and far from the theoretical application of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of the Saint's dreams. Of greater significance, the author resorts to his own personal *embeddedness* as a double informant (ex-Sufi and scholar) of the Boutchichi polity. Therefore, one gets the impression in his analysis of ethnographic materials in particular of the author's well-grounded, privileged perspective. On this account, his grasp of countless, "impenetrable" semiotic details of Sufi symbolism is insightful.

Thesis: Hermeneutics or Discourse?

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 (24-43) defines Sufism and elaborates some of the theoretical frameworks of understanding kryptopolitics by discriminatingly borrowing two concepts from Diane Singerman and James Scott. On this basis, "Kryptopolitics is a concept of unseen and esoteric politics that involves three layers of meaning (informal, hidden, and unseen)" (28). Safely outside any Marxist Gramscian notion of the political, his conceptualization is uncompromisingly grounded more in *making political sense* of the realm of the unreal, unseen, unsaid, and unsayable.

Chapter 2 outlines a historical account of the relationship between the Saint and the Sultan in pre-modern Morocco starting from the inception of Islamic conquest in 683. Sufism has materialized itself in the different historic periods as a powerful ideology of control normalized through ritualism and submission. Yet, as Bouasria concedes, the relationship between the Saint and the Sultan—creating the *Saintan* through the act of bricolage—has meant collaboration between the two protagonists. Bouasria gives us examples throughout Moroccan history where the Saint has been either inconsistent or uncompromising in his support of the King. In those episodes of conflict—as in the case of the scholar Ibn Tumart (during the Almoravid dynasty, 1042-1147)—the Saint ultimately loses the battle for legitimacy as the official discursive politics renders him intellectually impotent, spiritually megalomaniac, or someone deluded by nobility or lineage to the Prophet (53). In fact, such historic accounts demonstrate an unbending continuity—as in the most recent case of Abdessalam Yassine and his letters of admonition to King Hassan II. The realm of religion is the only domain that the state would never compromise on, as it is the very foundation of its *eternally* political legitimacy.

Chapter 3 continues quite successfully with the argument for kryptopolitics. In fact, this chapter sees the Boutchichi order as a repository of Sufi discursive movements such as one finds in its symbolism, parables, and codes of secrecy. Much of the evidence of this chapter—allegedly ethnographic—is based on an analysis of Sufi eschatology and prophetic theology as understood in anecdotes, paranormal stories, interviews, letters, and dreams. These represent discourses of political resistance against colonialism or against the authority of the Sultan. The Saint mobilizes spiritualist, cryptic theology in order to penetrate the political realm and the contestation of power. His means may be passive but he always *intends* to strategize, to calculate the exact measurements of visibility or invisibility, and the exact temporal circumstances when exoteric intervention is necessary, as in the case of Haj 'Abbas (72). Silence here plays the role of a realistic tactic to sustain political participation.

Dhikr itself may change from time to time, as in the case of Sidi Hamza, to adjust to new "market politics" (75). In fact, according to Bouasria, modern Sufism has entered a new capitalist phase as it trades in its own brand of spiritualism meeting the demands of a global clientele *intoxicated* by the artifice of Abrahamic goodwill, and humanity's common spiritual essence (76). The Boutchichi's order is irredeemably vulnerable to market adjustability so much so that it operates its own hierarchy of fragmented knowledge, psychic agitation, and

spiritual drunkenness. Ceremonies are organized and disciples both local and converted from other nationalities are seated depending on their spiritual and intellectual acumen and status. Of greater importance, the modern Boutchichi order mobilizes intellectuals to paint a global image of diversity, inclusiveness, international outreach, and friendliness. The Boutchichi order deploys market schema such as diluting strict religious law or focusing on the rhetoric of human vulnerability to sin and to moral deviation. Such an approach, Bouasria contends, is based on “emotional intelligence” (97). What drives kryptopolitics is a certain capacity to manage emotions, to tame them, discipline them, and silence them when necessary. For this purpose, dreams are perhaps the most rhetorically *emotive* strategies used by the Boutchichi order to resist repressive practices by the regime especially during the postcolonial period. In other words, both the state and the Saint have entered a machination based on a certain *order of things* well lubricated by modernity’s textual openings. In his continuous exploration of the symbolic power of dreams, Bouasria himself is lured to deploy his own vision to argue in Chapter 4 that Abdessalam Yassine *appeared* to him as an avatar in an occultist sense (119).

In Chapter 5 Bouasria continues his argument on the cross-borrowing of political tactics between the Sultan and the Saint for the sake of religious legitimization. Over the centuries, the state has managed to sustain its ultimate power over the religious realm insofar as it has embodied Islam, Arabism, Moroccan nationalism, and even most recently the discourse of Amazighism. This chapter culminates in an analysis of the results of Bouasria’s ethnographic study presented in the form of probability and non-probability sampling methods, factor analysis, and surveys. The results show contrasting characteristics and sensibilities among the Boutchichi and Adli populations. Such data analysis underscores the differences between the two movements’ political character, their levels of popularity, and their attitude to religious practices and to gender. Bouasria has also analyzed data in terms of the converts’ own self-perception. Furthermore, despite its limited analytical value—as the author has worked with insufficient testimonial data—Bouasria accepts personal testimony as the “main method of visibility” and “institutionalization of experience as a political practice” (134).

Using two contrasting examples (135) of the impact of Sufism in matrimonial life Bouasria demonstrates that spiritual experience, especially during *dhikr* (being subjected to both the process of individuation and institutionalization), either disconnects disciples from worldliness or intensifies their desire for worldliness such as in the case of gluttony or sexual arousal. Yet, the absence of enough testimonial material, or other type of sampling, may have led the author to lock the spiritual experience into a negative binary of “no sex or too much sex” (135). If spiritual experience were a drug, an addiction in either direction, it is so because it would already be infected by the intoxication of philosophical and material modernity and by the (*inter*)*addiction* of consumerist capitalism. On this account in particular, Bouasria simply did not draw upon a substantive and constitutive corpus of data from female members of both Sufi orders to come to such totalizing conclusions.

The data analysis in Chapter 5 is clumsily interrupted by a new biographical section entitled, “Morocco’s Three Kings” (143-151). The main weakness of this section is the fact that it reverts to many historical details about Morocco’s postcolonial history in general—focusing less on Sufism—and fails to establish any connections between the data analysis and the historiography. Such a methodological flaw becomes more problematic in the introduction of the section called “Jihad in Palestine” (151-153), which marks the author’s return to analyzing the results of his data compilation. The author moves awkwardly to the notion of jihad for both movements without making explicit its correlation with his core argument on kryptopolitics.

While Bouasria's process of argumentation thus far underscores the codependency of tactics between the Saint and the Sultan, he most often undermines the state's operations in *appearing* to believe—whilst it does not believe, or will never have to believe—the Saint's shrewd display of allegiance to the king. Above all, even in the case of AWI's public political posture against the monarchy as a form of *parrhesia*, there is no evidence that such daring to speak the truth to the god-like King has shaken the grounds beneath the institutions' total mastery of both domains of political maneuvering. What Bouasria truly describes is *something else* located *elsewhere*: the Boutchichi's hidden methodology of political semiotics. These are strikingly sign processes internally and externally mobilized to communicate cultural values and meanings.

With this in mind, Bouasria would like to have it both ways, “Abdessalam Yassine becomes Sidi Hamza's avatar in a world of political hyper-real events. If AWI practices politics, the Boutchichi order engages in ~~politics~~” (12) crossed out by the author. Yet, why should AWI play the role of an “extension” to the Boutchichi order if the whole point of the author's argument is to demonstrate that the Boutchichi movement is a fully-fledged political structure? Furthermore, even if this were possible, would not AWI dispense of its own “paranormal register” that may be distinct in itself yet close in some foundational aspects to the Boutchichi movement's spiritual order?

Bouasria's fuzzy and untheorized sense of what *the political* amounts to only manages to demythologize the apolitical motivation of Sufism. The fact that Sufism has systematically participated in the political hermeneutics² of the state may not necessarily mean it has become *Politicized a priori*. Modern Sufism has become politicized through the interplay of language games among the interlocutors in “ethical” discourse communities. The Boutchichi hidden transcripts are codes of poetic lived experience whose other more modest aim is to form textual meanings out of the dynamic yet *forceful* flow of semantic exchanges between the Saint and the King. At best, Bouasria recuperates imaginative elements of the Boutchichi movement seen in rumors, dreams, festivals, tales, songs, and jokes, even as they may be subjected to temporal evaporation.

Bouasria manages to build a line of argumentation more upon mystical theology than substantive political theory or even through a critical evaluation of the results of his own ethnographic research. Since kryptopolitics is based on clairvoyeurism—which expresses the rebellion of the Saint against the King (32)—it is important to underscore that the state operates its own kryptopolitics because the state holds what keeps it mystifyingly both secretive and *bare*. The Moroccan state understands this transcript through its own historically legitimizing discourse of sacredness. The modern nation-state, as Bouasria argues at times, beats the Boutchichi Saint in his own sacrosanct battle by outsmarting his usage of silence, confession, and ritualism (36).

On this account, this arrangement truly adds to the level of intoxication already exercised by fractured late capitalism; the taste of Sufism amplifies society's tendency towards unfiltered consumerism and encroaching globalization coming from the outside—always from *out there* where the grass is fertilized and watered, and hence is greener. The state instrumentalizes capitalism to counter the kryptopolitics of the Boutchichi order because undecodable secrecy is the ultimate nightmare of *al Makhzen*. Bouasria convincingly argues to what extent the state has administered its collaboration with the Boutchichi order, for

² See: Robert R. Sullivan, *Political Hermeneutics: The Early Thinking of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989).

example, to build new counter identity politics based on diversity that will challenge fundamentalist, exclusionist, and obscurantist religious movements.

Bouasria is right to demand that we do not undermine the significance of dreams and symbolism as sites for political ‘struggle’, yet the discursive claims that he charitably attributes to the Boutchichis are less than antagonistic or a systematic exercise of *parrhesia*. In their interaction with the monarchy, they produce exalted knowledge, interfere in social practices and subjectivity, and shift power relations of governance in a secular disciplinary state, but only to realize that they have remained at the margins of hermeneutical games. Bouasria himself admits that there is no historic evidence to demonstrate that the dewy eyed, dream-ridden Saint ever deployed a Sufi revolution, or helped institute a new Islamic dispensation.

Sufism of this self-effacing streak may be linguistically mystifying, and rhetorically sublime to decipher its sub-texts against the “cultural frames” of *realpolitik*. Nevertheless, one wonders: is not the meta-transcript by virtue of its self-concealment (and at times its self-discerning and shaded exposure), its resort to properties of literary deceit and moral duplicity, a means to *ironize* the politically *raw*? Isn’t the engagement of Sufism in the realm of Politics—by its lavish offerings of mystical motifs, illusory visions, mesmerizing ritualism, and stories of hallucinogenic encounters with the divine—nothing more than a participation in the very daily and yet flippant *hermeneutics* of the political?

The main issue of such an apologetic—perhaps even opportunistic—line of argumentation is the fact that it engages with political theory as a conceptual framework unbendingly outside the question of power—i.e., outside of the visceral, gut-wrenching, and unmitigated exercise of dominance. The author does not account for a gap that exists between the physical and psychological brutality and bloodiness of political supremacy on the one hand, and the leisurely, literally *laid-back* engagement of so-called *politics* on the other hand. Politics is a matter of contingency, loss of sleep, loss of one’s life and one’s being. In the case of Morocco, each “epistemological age” of pre-modernism, colonialism, post-colonialism, and Arab Spring-ism of the Cherifian Empire, has been a matter of trauma, depersonalization, despotism, and yet a *wretched* desire for worldliness and democratization.

On this account Bouasria’s treatment of dreams is far too presumptuous; he never puts their objective validity into question. For example, dreams may have been conscious constructions interwoven and presented to pass as visions belonging to the realm of the paranormal and deep subconscious. Therefore, what is a means of resistance is not only *not* a dream in essence and to begin with, but more of a deliberate political act since the verification of the accuracy of the dream is out of reach. Dreams, then, are mere extrasensory preoccupations of what is politically inhibited. The content of dreams is a narrative that must be decoded as *affective* information. As Bouasria even notes, dreams in the case of AWI may claim eschatological abilities (115). He makes a similar point in his biographical reference to French colonialists (144). We note from the examples he provides that dreams are usually positioned as worldly tactics to *speak to* and to *speak in* a moment of crisis; they are *secondary* penetrations into the sites of arbitration and struggle. Therefore dreams—though they may find their poetic *birthing* in the claims of the subconscious—are, as Freud explains, discursive manifestations of the repressed. In this sense, they are undertakings of *intercession* between unfulfilled political desire and the pragmatic exigency to stay on good terms with *primary* power. The utterance of a dream for a Sufi leader allows him to eschew *symbolic* political failure and dodge the violence of the state against *the unscathed*.

In his discussion of the Boutchichi strategies of kryptopolitics (86), one gets the impression, then, that these strategies are closer to the notion of diplomacy in today’s

lexicon of political sciences. One sees consistent use of qualities of finesse, discretion, and prudence in the management of delicate political, national or even international relations. By now, Bouasria has even *diplomiticized* Sufi hidden transcripts. The author's own effort to attribute some political *merit* to Boutchichi's *subtext* stems from an impetus to *diverge* his argument on kryptopolitics towards a new direction! This capacity for swinging, alluding, swerving, revealing, exposing, uttering, and silencing are marks of a *diplomatic sensibility*, of double and multiple standards that *distort* the relationship between what is outward and inward, *muddle* language and reality and ultimately *tangle* means and ends.

As will become clearer later in Chapter 6, what truly drives Bouasria's nuanced conceptualization of kryptopolitics is its ideological usefulness. Quietist Sufism had acquired more of a political currency not *only* for the *benefit* of a number of authoritarian Arab and Islamic regimes but because Western policymakers, especially those interested in advancing US global corporate interests, drew attention to its role in counteracting radical religious movements. Bouasria has embarked on a precarious task: to demystify a conundrum, "the Boutchichi order is not very active in the classical visible political realm (elections, marches, and parliamentary politics) [yet] invisibility does not mean that the order is apolitical" (9).

Antithesis: Negation of Kryptopolitics

The last chapter of the book (154-183) marks a sudden and perplexing shift to an issue barely related to the core argument. Bouasria decides to deal with the conservative Nixon Center report on Islamic movements, which recommends the financial and cultural promotion of Sufism to combat religious extremism. Through disjointed sections, or what appears to be a compilation of notes for a PhD thesis, Bouasria ploughs through a historiographical review of political involvement of different Sufi orders in Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, Indonesia, Malaysia, Chechnya, Uzbekistan, India, Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. In such tediously formulaic analysis, the author is usually bogged down in excavating expedient facts, ideas, and rituals to respond to the proposals outlined by the think tank scholars working to promote a coherent *foreign policy* on Sufi movements.

On this account, Bouasria is *seduced* to speak as an informant and advisor to the US government. Taking his role seriously, he engages with advisory perspectives offered by notoriously traditional scholars such as Bernard Lewis, Hedieh Mirahmadi, and Daniel Markey. Since the argument on kryptopolitics is now vaguely appropriated to serve the author's contribution to this discussion on policy, he punctuates the end of each biographical section with such "corrective" clinchers as: "The American policy of an imposed global Sufi promotion will not succeed and may actually be counterproductive" (154); "Any seeming 'successes' in using Sufism to combat extremism may vanish in a world of uneasy and fragile political alliances" (155); "The Russian embrace of Sufism as an alternative to Wahhabi creed could backfire as Sufis could pursue independence" (173); "At best, the success in Uzbekistan may be temporary" (175); "It seems that 'soft support' for Sufis failed, but given the variety of Sufi sects, it seems absolutely ill-advised for the West to take any action here regarding Sufism, because the problem is political, and the blowback against occupiers would be substantial" (180); and, "Tajikistan seems to be an instance where official support for the separation between church and state is the strongest weapon against extremism" (180).

Referring to the unnerving case of Iran, Bouasria insists, "The US would be well advised to stay out of any religion discussions or actions in Iran. There appears to be an internal struggle over the place of religion in the state, and Khomeini's legitimacy as the ultimate

religious leader presiding over the state” (178). Such “intelligence” is particularly gratuitous as the author misidentifies Ruhollah Khomeini (1979-1989) with the current supreme leader (Ali Khamenei, 1989-). The same careless inattention to accuracy makes Fathullah Gülen leave the United States in 1998 (171). Gülen left Turkey in 1999 claiming that the trip was for medical treatment.

Bouasria is more concerned with pointing out to his senior colleagues that the simulacrum one sees in the ocular and sub-textual economy of Sufism (note how the case of the Boutchichis is now almost completely suspended!) always hides an inward and potentially *sinister* plan to reach *worldly* power and therefore would likely *threaten* the US empire. The aim of scholars working as policy advisors is to *depoliticize* Sufi Muslims by inserting their creed into religious global tourism. Bernard Lewis’s long career as an Orientalist has consistently reiterated the same stereotype about Muslims; they are *genetically* inclined towards violence and secrecy. Bouasria takes his lead from Lewis’s declaration that “Sufis are peaceful but not pacifists” (159). On this account, they must either be subdued by “soft power” when they harbor undecipherable codes, or must be contained by “brutal wars” when *we* decide they are hostile to the democratic values of *our* Western civilization. Similarly, Bouasria’s sudden shift in argumentation is here *to negate* the political potential of Sufism from *within itself*. What interests the consultant-scholar is to build a policy-theory—from his vantage point as an authentic spokesperson—that instructs policymakers on how to *subordinate* the covert and ominous politics of Sufi metaphysics. Boutchichi or not, and for all intents and purposes, Sufis may never be trusted for their manners of suspect “soup-ism” (69).

Most disturbingly perhaps, this unpolished section of manuscript is formulaic and poorly written; it is made of patchy and disjointed fragments of biographical reviews. Complete paragraphs have been rewritten twice in different parts of the chapter. For example, the section on Egypt, starting from the third paragraph on page 159, is rehashed almost verbatim on pages 180-181. The same thing applies to paragraphs on pages 161 and 162 where the same notes reappear on pages 181-182 and pages 169-170. Summaries of the US foreign policy on page 163 are recycled on pages 158-159. Paragraphs on Morocco and Algeria are salvaged verbatim across pages 161 and 165. There are two more slightly dissimilar fragments of rewritten paragraphs with minor changes across pages 168 and 161. Bouasria’s clumsy and messy style of writing extends all the way to page 169, and towards the end of this chapter reprocessing biographical data in essence from page 162. Bouasria’s redundancy has further impaired his already compromised argument.

Therefore, this final chapter locks Bouasria’s thesis into its antithesis of both structure and argumentation. No doubt, *Sufism and Politics in Morocco: Activism and Dissent* is a worthwhile work of ethnography that includes an invaluable personal dimension (i.e., in the form of the author’s candid confession). Yet precisely because of this, its overall scholarly quality is tarnished by a certain otherworldly apprehension typical of a disciple. More seriously, the ideological and uncritical implication of Bouasria’s argument in repressive US policymaking on terrorism (178) shows that his core promise to mystically excavate the political agency of the Boutchichis has remained a farce. Bouasria’s guarded *kryptopolitics* should be crossed out too but this time because it is an undemocratic characterization of Sufism unfairly placed outside the logic of the secular, worldly, unfinished experiments of the Arab Spring, unfolding ecstasy, euphoria, and catharsis—unveiled, fearless, and defiant.

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