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## Rescuing Biography from the Nation: Discrete Perspectives on Political Change in Morocco

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### Main Witnesses and Master Narratives of Political Change

In 2009, I was in search of a privileged observer who could help me understand the complex dynamics of the formation of capitalism in Morocco. A colleague introduced me to Ahmed Benkirane, an 80-year-old man who had recently retired from a very active life in business and the public space. Shortly after our first meeting, Benkirane asked me if I would help him write his memoirs. His proposal sounded quite in line with the spirit of that time: giving voice to witnesses of the past

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<sup>1</sup>The expression “Years of lead” is commonly used to point a period of Moroccan history characterized by violence and repression committed by the State. The ERC promoted public hearings of witnesses and victims of violence and repression committed between 1956 and 1999. On the ERC see Vairel (2008) and Linn (2011).

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had become a national priority in Morocco since the launch, in 2004, of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (ERC), an instrument of transitional justice in charge of gathering the truth about the violations committed by the State during the “Years of lead”.<sup>1</sup> His profile, however, was quite uncommon: the most-heard voices in the public debate at that time were those of 50-year-old former activists in anti-system political organizations. Most of them were from intellectual and middle-class social milieus and many had experienced prison and torture. It seemed to me that Benkirane’s life story could provide a valuable contribution to understanding political change in Morocco beyond the voices of the victims, which have become one of the main voices of contemporary history far beyond the Moroccan case (Traverso 2016). At the same time, my curiosity was fueled by the fact that people of his age rarely spoke in public in those years: the actors of Morocco’s “nationalist generation”, to which Benkirane belongs, were acknowledged by the public debate without apparently feeling the necessity of hearing their voices, and were completely absent in the common-sense narrative on what happened after independence was gained in 1956.

Although I was very flattered by his proposal and intrigued by his profile, I remained rather skeptical, not only about my competence to accomplish the work but also about the relevance of relying on a biography to carry out my research. As a political scientist, I had been used to thinking of the subjective perspective that characterizes biographical writing as a sufficient reason for placing biography as a method outside the boundaries of my discipline. Political science has generally steered away from the biographical turn that the social sciences are experiencing.<sup>2</sup> As Lewis Edinger maintained in the early 1960s, political biographies are seldom carried out by political scientists (Edinger 1964, 423). The latter have progressively disinvested themselves from the study

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<sup>2</sup>The contributions of Bourdieu (1986) and Levi (1989) are at the origins of the debate on the uses of biography in social sciences. Loriga (2010) and Bayart (2014) have contributed to renewing this debate in recent years. For an interdisciplinary overview of the recent biographical turn see Renders et al. (2016).

of political leaders in favor of the study of political leadership by establishing frameworks of analysis based on general patterns of collective behavior.<sup>3</sup>

The study of political leadership in Morocco is constructed, to this day, on the social categories upon which John Waterbury (1970) based his analysis of the Moroccan political elite in the 1960s. According to Waterbury's thesis, the king, as Commander of the Faithful, plays the role of the arbiter at the core of a segmentary society structured on relations of alliance or dissidence between specific social groups. The power structure supporting his authority, denominated *Makhzen*,<sup>4</sup> is defined by unstable alliances between the monarchy and the social groups that accept that they must pay taxes, provide men for the army, and undertake public roles. Waterbury focuses, in particular, on the unstable relations between the monarchy and the *Fassi*, a number of big families with notable origins from the city of Fez, whose presence in politics was considerable at the time he wrote.<sup>5</sup> Benkirane's life story is quite different from the patterns of collective behavior that such a framework of analysis presupposes. Even though he actively contributed to the struggle against the French Protectorate he is almost a generation younger than the actors generally included in the category of "nationalists," and his active participation in the national movement was mostly outside the partisan organizations usually associated with this category, such as the *Istiqlal Party*. Coming from the city of Marrakech distinguishes him from the inner circle of the *Fassi*. Moreover, even though he has held several senior civil servant posts at different times in his life, his activities within the State apparatus differed from the representations of authority, coercion and violence usually associated with the category of *Makhzen*.

At the time of my first meeting with Ahmed Benkirane these categories were still the reference and main patterns of the master narrative

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<sup>3</sup>Blondel (1987) clearly defines the premises of this analytic turn. Dahl (2005) is among the most acknowledged works approaching political leadership without referring to political leaders.

<sup>4</sup>The term *Makhzen*, literally "warehouse" or "chest," is employed both to indicate the unaccountable power structure supporting the monarchy and to indicate the coercive apparatus of the State.

<sup>5</sup>According to Waterbury (1970) the shared traditions, alliances, and experiences that the *Fassi* preserved become relevant in order to acquire positions of power.

of political change. The activities of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (ERC) had contributed to defining not only the main witnesses of political change in Morocco but also, and more importantly, to shaping the master narrative for interpreting their stories, which relies on both a chronological and an interpretive frame that are rarely questioned. The fact that the ERC did not take the timeframe before 1956 into consideration contributed to the consolidation of a taken-for-granted narrative of political change before independence. At the same time, the period between 1956 and 1999 became the most discussed timeframe of political change. The activities of the ERC also contributed to renewing and reinforcing an interpretative frame accounting for political change based on the struggles of opposing segments of society aiming to take control of the State. Hence before 1956, the master narrative on political change is structured upon the struggle between the Moroccans and the French. After 1956, attention moves to the political actors opposing the monarchy: the Fassi at first, and then the victims of the State's repression.

In the face of the solidity of this interpretive framework, taking a less-heard voice into consideration was not sufficient to move beyond the master narrative of political change. It was not a matter of which voice to listen to, but of how to listen to that voice. In this paper, I describe the process that led me to dismiss biography as a subject and to develop what I call biographic fieldwork. In a general sense, fieldwork research is a way of investigating social phenomena through direct experience. Ethnography adopts fieldwork as its privileged approach to inquire into people's lives. On one hand, arguing that my fieldwork is not ethnographic but biographic means, in my terms, adopting biography as the entry point to sharing a double experience: the experience of preserving things of the past, and the experience of remembering and accounting for political change. On the other hand, arguing that the fieldwork I conducted is biographic is a way for me to place the attention on the dialogic relation that Ahmed Benkirane and I developed during this work, and

the shared character of such an experience.<sup>6</sup> The personal documentation that Benkirane has collected all his life, and the memory associated with this documentation that he shared with me during our intensive meetings and exchanges over a relatively long period of time, constitute the principal data of my biographic fieldwork. In the following, I explain how I developed this approach, and how it allowed me to explore political change in Morocco beyond the established master narratives.

## Biographies, Traces, and Nonhegemonic Accounts of the Nation

The fact that Benkirane was as hesitant as I was about biographical writing challenged me from our first meeting. While determined to tell his story, he was unsure about the best way to do it. Considering both my skepticism and his doubts about biographical writing, I had decided at first to carry out interviews not only with him but also with a number of other actors with similar profiles: independence activists of the same generation and a comparable social milieu, with experience in both public institutions and business. Benkirane played the role of gatekeeper and was my privileged research witness during this phase. He not only helped me to draw up a list of actors and ways of reaching them but also advised me before and after my interviews with them, drawing my attention to the most salient episodes that each had witnessed. I conducted a series of biographical interviews with several of these participants, exploring the relations among them and their personal trajectories after independence. I originally conceived the operation as functional in the identification of patterns of collective behavior suitable for framing Benkirane's trajectory.

Almost a year after our first meeting, Benkirane gave me access to some private documentation from his past experiences: the oldest dated back to his childhood and the newest concerned his recent activities.

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<sup>6</sup>I analyzed elsewhere the heuristic value of the shared intersubjectivity resulting from the process of deconstruction of our respective subjectivities—that of the actor who wants to give his testimony and that of the researcher who, from this requirement, aims to read the trends of political change. See Bono (2019).

The contents were very diverse and included professional and private correspondence, the minutes of meetings, bylaws, pamphlets, projects, reports, and booklets, classified into approximately 250 folders some of which concerned specific roles he had played in public institutions and the business sector, others referring to his political participation and various other experiences including travel, marriage, meetings, conferences, spare time and family issues. In addition to this documentation, Benkirane had kept approximately 1000 photographs and some collections of magazines and newspapers, some of which he had been the editor. It was hard to find a folder containing complete coverage of the issue it referred to: not only had the documentation been collected on an irregular basis, as is common in personal archives, but during his life Benkirane had moved home many times to different cities in Morocco and even abroad. The documents he had conserved were therefore those that he had managed to keep. By giving me access to such material he was probably aiming to provide me with some starting points from which to overcome the difficulties he foresaw in writing his biography. The documentation appeared to me the empirical material that I needed to frame his profile within more general patterns of collective behavior that I felt more prepared to analyze than his biography.

However, I could not find any evidence in the documentation that could link Benkirane's profile to a precise social category, nor did it enable me to situate his trajectory along precise political divides. Immersing myself in his documentation made me realize that taking his subjectivity seriously was much more relevant than trying to classify his profile within a broader category of actors in order to explore political change through his life story. Political biographies often give the impression of a fusion between the subject who is telling his or her life story and the social body that *s/he* wants to represent. In this way biographical accounts and narratives of the nation state exert a reciprocal fictional influence: the nation as an imagined community is embodied in the biographies of imaginary actors. Benkirane's material was a valuable starting point from which to avoid the risk of accounting for his life in fictional terms by emphasizing specific characteristics and experiences and neglecting others. Exploring the documentation allowed me to focus on him not as a militant, a senior official, or a businessman, but as a man

of flesh and blood whose militant, senior official, and business activities could be explored and interpreted through the traces that he has kept of such experiences.

In the most general sense, traces can be understood as what remains of phenomena, facts, actors, etc., which we cannot directly experience. The notion of traces is often used in modern history and anthropology to refer to something that has disappeared or is difficult to access. From the perspective proposed by micro-historians, traces are clues that need to be questioned and interpreted.<sup>7</sup> Their interpretation leads to considering the actor who left them as a level of analysis for capturing wider phenomena, rather than as a subject. Focusing on the traces that Benkirane has kept from his own experiences directed my attention away from his biographical account to focus on the formation of the nation-state beyond the overlap between his life story and national history. At that point in my work I stopped using his full name and started privileging his initials to explain his place in my work. I was not going to write the biography of Ahmed Benkirane: I was going to explore the formation of the nation-state following the biographical traces of that process which Abk has kept.

My first approach to the documentation sought to identify the episodes, moments and phases that could be considered salient in Abk's life. Tracing such phases was a way for me to free his life story from the turning points that are conventionally considered in accounting for political change in Morocco, such as its independence and successions to the throne. Abk's personal and family events were certainly important for accounting of his life story beyond such turning points, such as the date of his own birth in 1927 and those of his brothers and sisters in 1926, 1930, 1931, 1933, and 1942; the deaths of two of his sisters and then of his father in the space of two years between 1958 and 1959; his marriage in 1962; the birth of his three children in 1963 and 1964; and his mother's death in 1971. Identifying the moments of change of domicile and professional activity in the documentation was even more important to my aims. According to the periodization I reconstructed, Abk spent his childhood in Marrakech from his birth until

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<sup>7</sup>On the notion of traces in microhistory, see Levi (1985) and Ginzburg (1979).

1937, when he moved to Rabat to attend the Guessous Institution, one of the most-acknowledged free schools inspired by the national movement.<sup>8</sup> At the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 he moved back to Marrakech. In 1946–47 he attended a high school of commerce and industry in Casablanca for two years before moving to Paris to enroll in a prestigious business school. The documents he kept from the period he spent in Paris are testimony to his active political engagement.

Abk returned to Morocco in 1951. After a few months spent at his family home he moved to Casablanca. His material includes documents from the commercial activity for which he was responsible at his father's sales office and the vibrant political activity that he developed in parallel. Between late 1955 and 1960 he spent most of his time in Rabat working on shaping the first commercial and economic policies in independent Morocco, first as Director of the Cabinet of the Ministry of Trade and Economy, then as Secretary of State of the same Ministry, and later as Policy Officer in charge of specific negotiations, notably on Morocco's exit from the Franc Zone and the recovery of the State Bank in 1959. Later he worked as the director of some important public enterprises. When he moved back to Casablanca in 1960, he was appointed managing director of a private bank, became a shareholder of and consultant to a number of international companies, and began his vibrant activity in the fields of insurance and finance. In parallel Abk was the founding president of a media group that published an economic newspaper and a magazine between 1960 and 1966, where he took an active part in the newsroom work. Between 1966 and 1968 he was appointed managing director of a financial public institution supporting monetary and public development policies based in Rabat. In 1969–70 he was the director of a public office in charge of agricultural exports headquartered in Casablanca, and in 1970 he was elected Member of the House of Representatives and President of the Provincial Council of Marrakech. In 1971 he was the editor of a newspaper for a few months, and between 1973 and 1976 he lived and worked in Brussels as the Moroccan Ambassador to Belgium and the European Community (EC). During this time,

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<sup>8</sup>See Damis (1974) on the free school phenomenon in general and Damis (1975) on the free school movement in Morocco.



he negotiated the first commercial agreement between Morocco and the EC.

When Abk returned to Morocco he was appointed to the Chamber of Representatives as delegate of the Casablanca Chamber of Commerce, where he remained from 1977 to 1983. In 1979 he contributed to the institution of a political party, founded with the support of the monarchy, which gathered the backing of many businessmen. He participated in the creation of the party's newspaper and took part in several of its international delegations in the first half of the 1980s. Once back in Casablanca, Abk also resumed his business activity in the insurance and finance sector, in parallel taking up a series of managerial roles at the head of large companies throughout the 1980s. Between 1996 and 2004 he was Vice President of the National Confederation of Entrepreneurs. After that he retired, but he continued to lead a very active life in both business and the public space. In the years following his retirement, Abk has been honorary president of an insurance company that he founded, participated in various investments, held a number of mediation and arbitration positions, participated in the Equity and Reconciliation Commission interviews, and contributed to a series of initiatives commemorating the struggle for independence.

Following Abk's biographical traces opened up two research directions. First, it helped me shift the attention from Abk as a social actor to the various social processes he was involved in during his life. In his biography of Mozart, Norbert Elias (1993) disabuses the reader of the idea that even such a master artist had functioned in a vacuum as an autonomous genius independent of the situation in which he found himself. Accordingly, the biographical account that I was able to retrace through Abk's personal documentation was not intended to classify him into a social category nor evaluate the extent to which he contributed to the nationalist and democratic achievements generally used to account for political change. My aim was rather to retrace his life course by bringing out the episodes that have marked it, the activities in which he has been involved and the social worlds in which he spent his time. Consequently, I have chosen not to extrapolate from these processes the experiences that could be considered relevant to bringing his trajectory back to a specific social classification, such as the categories of the

heroes of the nationalist struggle and the victims of the authoritarian state, as part of the *Mahkzen* or as *Fassi*. Starting from the traces he produced as a witness to certain events, I had the opportunity to reconstruct and explore the circumstances, the particular contexts and thus also the contingencies and the hazards of Abk's personal trajectory, which are completely overshadowed in most biographical accounts of nationalist activists as they are not considered relevant to the process of the formation of the nation-state. Focusing on his personal traces allowed me to draw out how Abk experienced such a collective phenomenon.

Second, focusing on Abk's personal traces was my starting point for exploring the continuous process of the formation of the nation-state itself. Instead of exploring his personal trajectory by adopting the usual sequences considered when accounting for the nation-making process, I adopted the periodization emerging from his traces as a starting point for exploring such processes. My idea was not that the two temporalities were to be considered independently, but that in order to better understand their interconnections it could be fruitful to distinguish between them. I was not interested in finding out from his personal documentation what Abk was doing before or after the main dates that are commonly used to tell the story of the nation-state in Morocco such as independence in 1956, the state of exception in 1965, the failed two coups d'état against King Hassan II in 1971 and 1972, or the arrival at the government of the historical opposition in 1997. Instead, starting from the material referring to different phases of Abk's life experience, I was eager to explore how the power relations worked and to study the main political cleavages, the boundaries of political sovereignty, the ways in which domination was exercised, the form of the imagined community and the processes that led to political socialization.

## **Biography as Archivistic Imaginary of Continuity**

In her work on the decolonization of Egypt, Omnia El Shakry (2015) remarks that secular reforms and Islamic movements are generally archived separately. This tendency has led to underestimation of the role

of some intellectuals generally framed as Islamists, such as Sayyid Qutb, in the processes of reform and decolonization. Similarly, in Morocco the historical phases and social phenomena that Abk experienced are generally archived separately: the periods prior and subsequent to independence in 1956, the economic and political activity, public and private affairs. Not only are these phenomena generally explored from the perspective of different sources, they are also, and most importantly, often seen as distinct from one another. Abk's archive led me to explore the continuity between these phenomena: I started considering his documentation not only as a source of information about his life story but also as a reference for imaging the continuity between timeframes that are generally accounted for separately. The documentation brought together in his personal archive refers to phenomena that are generally considered separately, but in his life story there is no room for partitions between the period prior and subsequent to independence, between economic and political activity, between public and private affairs.

Adopting biography as an imaginary for thinking about the continuity between these phenomena seemed to me particularly relevant given the current conditions of the national archives in Morocco. Until recently, archival research on Morocco has relied on colonial sources. As in British India and many other colonial contexts, political occupation was preceded and accompanied by the production of sources on Morocco and the Moroccan people that led to the compilation of a veritable social inventory, realized by ethnographers and colonial officers (Burke III 2007). After independence most of the administrative archive produced during the colonial era was moved to the diplomatic archives in France, reinforcing the tendency to consider archival sources extraneous and unavailable for the study of the Moroccan nation-state. In 1966 the Moroccan government made an official request to UNESCO, soliciting its expertise on "the procedures to be adopted and the methods to be practiced to inventory and preserve documents and archives" (Pérotin 1969, 3). In his final report, the expert in charge of the mission described the fragility of Morocco's archival legislation, structures, and practices. The strategy prescribed for dealing with this situation was never applied: Morocco's national archives were established only in 2007 following a recommendation from the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, and

the institution opened to the public in 2013. The establishment of the national council in charge of coordination between public institutions and the national archives was only established in July 2017, and the building that will house the archives is still under construction.

The fragility of the national archival infrastructure reinforced, in my eyes, the importance of reading Abk's documentation as an archive. The establishment of a first inventory of his archive gave me an idea of what kinds of phenomena are researchable through such biographical documentation. The items referring to Abk's childhood and education comprised just a few photographs and some disparate documents including old identity cards and copies of diplomas. Regardless of their small number, they offered unique archival material on a period that has mainly been accounted for on the basis of knowledge produced by colonial ethnographers studying tribes and oriental curiosities. The documentation becomes more abundant and more heterogeneous, although it is still disparate, with Abk's sojourn in Paris as a student. In addition to the diplomas and the number of photographs documenting his many trips with friends and classmates all over Europe, he has kept some study notes, an internship report, and a considerable amount of political documentation of various types. The latter becomes especially abundant in the period that Abk spent in Casablanca after leaving Paris. A folder dedicated to family business refers to the same period. This material seemed most useful for broadening the knowledge offered by the available archival coverage from that time, which mainly relies on intelligence notes from the French protectorate's security services and records produced and conserved by Moroccan political parties engaged in the struggle for independence, especially the Istiqlal party. Regardless of their opposite origins, these two sources contribute to drawing an image of the French and the Moroccans as two different political groups, each homogeneous within themselves and radically antagonistic toward the other during the protectorate. Abk's documentation, however, enables us to read a certain amount of diversification within these groups and suggests depicting the relations between the two groups less univocally.

Most of the material that Abk has preserved refers to episodes and activities between 1955 and 1976, when he was first working for the government and then involved in business activities, before moving back

to working for state institutions, then back to business, and later to state institutions again. The variety of activities covered by the documentation and the diversity of the sectors in which they were carried out contrasts with the regularity with which the documentation has been collected, classified and stored. The material covering these 25 years has been added with relatively constant frequency and the typologies of the documents collected are quite homogeneous. Abk has classified the material in folders related to specific issues, most of which cover his role in the issue quite exhaustively and allow the retracing of a fairly accurate chronology of his activities. The different folders covering political activities, those related to government offices, to business, and to the media, all contain correspondence, notes, messages, reports, projects, business cards, and addresses. In addition, most of the photographs precisely recall the episode or task to which they refer. The material from the period following Abk's return to Morocco in 1976 gradually becomes less frequent and more disparate. Only some precise sequences are easy to identify, such as the phase during which he was a member of the political party and the period he spent at the national business confederation, thanks to the folders' references to several issues that he managed during his mandates. A variety of documents refer also to some of his positions at the head or on the board of a number of important companies, but the scarcity of the material makes it hard to follow the process.

The consistency of Abk's documentation of the period between 1955–1976 contrasts with the scarcity of material from the same period in the national archives. This lack of archival coverage reinforces the idea that during the Years of Lead the establishment of authoritarianism involved the constriction of the economic, social, and cultural spaces as if emptying them of every sort of everyday process. The documentation that Abk has managed to preserve refers instead to extremely wide and dynamic daily economic, social, intellectual, and cultural processes. These processes have remained marginal in terms of what Halbwachs (2013) calls the “social frameworks of memory”. Looking through Abk's documentation convinced me that the archival vacuum characterizing the Years of Lead corresponds neither to an actual lack of activity during this period nor to the absence of its documentation: it became clear to me that the scarcity of documents referring to the Years of Lead relied on

the oriented, selective and restricted statute assigned to sources referring to that timeframe, which are rarely recognized as archival.

Abk's traces from the 1960s were particularly significant in my development of this argument. In May 1960, at the end of Abdallah Ibrahim's period of government, Abk resigned and returned to private business, as did so many of his generation who had served the State as senior officials since independence in 1956. His material from the 1960s refers to a wide range of his financial activities at the time in the banking, insurance, and equity investment sectors. I found this documentation very suitable for exploring the process of political change on at least three levels. First, it was possible to build an idea of the Ministry of Economy's activities in its governance of these sectors, and more generally, its relations with the private sector; public discourse on the 1960s refers almost solely to the Ministry of Interior as the principal apparatus of coercion. Second, Abk's archive provided me with a valuable means of exploring the progressive acquisition of control by national capital of economic sectors that were still dominated by foreign investors. This contrasts with the dominant public discourse on the acquisition of economic sovereignty, which situates this process in the 1970's when the entry of Moroccan capital in private companies became mandatory by law. Lastly, Abk's documentation allowed me to observe the redeployment of many nationalist actors into the financial sector, and the progressive transformation of the sector into a battlefield in which power relations were still being played out, despite the end of Ibrahim's government generally being seen as the starting point of the rise of the monarchy to the detriment of the nationalist movement.

During the protectorate, Jacques Riche (1936) published a very rich repertory of archival sources on Morocco that were available both nationally and internationally, suggesting that the generally-accepted opinion of the fragility of archival documentation on Morocco was the result of failures in archive policy rather than a lack of sources. A few years after independence, Germain Ayache (1961, 311) claimed the existence of a consistent archival heritage on Morocco, affirming that the "legend of Morocco without archives" was based rather on a precise orientation of historiography: national historians tending to move away from the contemporary archival sources, which were considered too close to

the colonial regime, focusing instead either on the period preceding the protectorate or on biographic accounts and oral history.

Questioning these archive politics convinced me of the importance of basing my archival imaginary on Abk's biography. His life course provided me with a suitable frame for considering his private documentation not only as a collection of sources informing us about different phases of Morocco's history and diverse social phenomena, but also as an object of inquiry in itself. The very fact that a single actor had produced, kept, and stored such a quantity of material was in itself an object of inquiry worth studying to explore the process of political change. This perspective provided me with further levels of analysis that enabled me to study the making of the nation-state. In the first place, my attention was drawn by the concomitance of archival documentation referring to disparate activities and the recurrence of the same actors in different fields of action. Furthermore, the irregular consistency of the stored documentation offered another fruitful avenue for questioning the nation-making process. Changes in the ways in which Abk produced and kept material referring to disparate experiences appeared to me an original object for inquiry: the very fact of owning and preserving documentation could be considered a relevant dimension in the analysis of power relations, political change and the borders of political struggle.

## Memory Practices and Biographic Fieldwork

Working on Abk's archive involved spending a lot of time at his house. Between 2011 and 2015 the documentation was stored in a room to which I had free access during my stay in Morocco. In 2016 it was digitalized and moved to the premises of an archival company with better conditions for conservation, but I continued to have free access to his house.<sup>9</sup> My frequent presence at his home transformed our interactions. Our meetings progressively ceased to be scheduled, and the goals of the

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<sup>9</sup>The online version of Abk's archive is under construction. See: <https://fondсахmedbenkirane.archiui.com/>.

interviews I regularly conducted with him became more open and flexible. The fact that it took quite a long period of time to conduct my work with Abk helped to consolidate our relationship. After our first meeting in 2009 we met every time I traveled to Morocco: almost daily for a week every two months between 2009 and 2012 and almost daily for a week every three months between 2012 and 2016. In the last years I stayed at Abk's house for almost a week every three to four months. These frequent and intensive visits constitute the premises for conducting what I call biographical fieldwork on his experiences of political change and his memory practices.

As Olick and Robbins (1998) suggest, studying memory as a practice involves questioning how in a given society one remembers the past, how one attributes meaning to the past in the present, and how these processes affect social relations. From this perspective I started considering Abk's archive not only in terms of traces of his past experiences but also on two further levels. First, I view Abk's archive as a memory practice in itself, a manifestation, among others, of his memory. Second, I see it as a way for bringing to light his relationship to the past, and the weight of that past within his present, through the memory that the archival traces solicit. Thinking about political change via such biographical fieldwork led me to deconstruct the idea of the subject itself: it was neither a matter of exploring the life story of a significant actor nor of obtaining a careful reconstruction of a typical man of his time. It was not therefore a case of contributing to the national truth, but rather understanding the singular truth of my subject: the ways in which he lived the episodes he remembers, and the weight of past experience in his life.

Through this biographical fieldwork I was able, first of all, to discuss with Abk the memories of his past experiences and the meanings he attributed to them. I started to conduct another kind of interview with him which was mnemonic rather than biographical, a process whereby he would recall the memories evoked by the traces that I could identify from the documentation. Archival documentation became my principal instrument for soliciting and stimulating his memory. The traces of past experiences were useful not only for the information that I could obtain but also, and most importantly, for triggering and soliciting the memories and emotions that the events, people, and situations that I



came across in his archive evoked in Abk. The interviews no longer related to a certain period, a specific episode, or particular individuals. The chain of memories and accounts that a simple trace could evoke became for me the primary source for apprehending Abk's national experience. Building trust and confidence between the two of us became of foremost importance in this work of recognition and contextualization through mnemonic interviews. More than that, constructing and sharing a common ground of landmarks and a common language created an important resource for receiving and interpreting his memory practices. I started to realize that this method could work when, instead of telling me "You didn't ask me the important questions...", as he had done at the end of most of our interviews during the first part of my work, one day Abk started saying "You've made me think of..." which is the starting point for returning to forgotten memories.

Interviews developed through this mnemonic technique became my sources for contextualizing and completing information acquired from archival documentation. It was particularly interesting to frame the archival objects referring to Abk's political activism with the national movement in this way. The memories associated with a single archival object were always plural, and sometimes apparently inconsistent with one another. For instance, the only trace of the period that Abk spent at the Guessous Institution, a photograph of one of his favorite classmates standing in the school grounds with a teacher, allowed the contextualization of this experience in four different frames. First, the frame of his political education through which he was not only initiated into nationalist keywords, discourses, and rituals but also where he established his first contact with future leaders of the national movement both of the older generation and of his own age. Second, in the frame of his family relations and lifestyle: his years at the Guessous Institution were his first after leaving his father's house, and he was experimenting with a different kind of authority and a different lifestyle in a new city. Third, it was simultaneously a prestigious experience in complete continuity with the elite position of his family in the context of Marrakech and his first experience of social stratification within the Moroccan elite in the cities of Fez and Rabat. Fourth, in the frame of the political conjuncture of the

time: in Abk's memory the fact that his stay at the Guessous Institution was interrupted early on by the outbreak of the Second World War was an extremely important element in the construction of his political consciousness: "We realized that the French could be defeated," he used to tell me.

Moreover, biographical fieldwork offered a level of analysis for exploring the phenomena and processes to which Abk applied the terms "nation", "power" and even "politics" as meaningful categories. The first step consisted of asking him which episodes he considered relevant to the process of nation-making in the trajectory I had reconstructed through his personal documentation. The defeat of France in the Second World War in 1940 which put an end to his stay at Guessous Institution, the killing of the Tunisian syndicalist Farhat Hached in 1952 a few months after Abk's move to Casablanca, the splitting of the Istiqlal party in 1959 when he decided to resign from the Ministry of Commerce, and the end of the Abdallah Ibrahim government of 1960 a few months before he moved back to Casablanca are among the "non-events" (Vezzadini 2015, 9) to which he referred when explaining his experience of the nation. These episodes generally remained in the background of national historiography. Some of them occurred after the date on which Morocco gained its independence, which is generally viewed as the endpoint in the process of nation-making. Discussing the meanings that Abk associates with his past experiences beyond the factual content of the traces referring to them allowed me to broaden the spaces of political action that he considers meaningful in the shaping of the nation.

This is how, for instance, a 1951 letter in which Abk defends the interests of Moroccan olive oil traders in Casablanca became the starting point for exploring his relations with the small traders active in the armed resistance against the French Protectorate. His memories about the networks between the small traders, the nationalist activists of his generation, and the armed resistance offer unique information about how the struggle for independence had already started within the national borders at a time that historiographers have until now mainly studied from the perspective of activities led from abroad by exiled nationalist leaders. Likewise, a folder containing consistent documentation on the business projects of a

joint venture involving Moroccan and US investments in 1962–63 initiated discussion about some of the informal ways in which international relations were developed at that time even beyond the most acknowledged relationship between Morocco and France. Similarly, documents on the foundation and activities of the Moroccan Royal Golf Federation produced an opportunity to discuss the importance of private initiatives aimed at encouraging public debate, even after the state of exception had been proclaimed in 1965. Sharing Abk's memories of how social relations developed in private spaces during moments of leisure or worldliness deepened my understanding of a political phase in Morocco that is generally depicted as devoid of any possibility for public debate.

The King and his entourage are the main actors on which both academic literature and public debate focus in analyses of the political change that Morocco has experienced since gaining independence. Until the 1990s it was very rare to find sources, witnesses, or accounts of what had happened in Morocco beyond the common opposition between the coercive apparatus of the regime and the part of society that suffered from it the most. Governmental institutions are accounted for as spaces that progressively lost their importance as the King acquired an increasing control over the country. The work I shared with Abk enabled me to explore political change beyond such representations. My biographical fieldwork allowed me to explore different spaces in which the political game continued in parallel to the progressive disempowering of institutions. The memories that Abk associated with a number of business activities, personal experiences, and private events, the meanings he attributed to them and their contextualization suggest that the deactivation of the political dynamics in the areas assigned to them did not indicate their disappearance but rather their displacement to other fields of action. To explore these processes, it was necessary to approach the archival coverage of a number of economic and private activities without interpreting documents by linking them to a single field, or to one and only "jurisdiction," to use the terminology proposed by Angelo Torre (2011). This operation helped me explore the porosity of the distinction between public and private, politics and economics, in the nation-making process.

Abk's storytelling allowed me to explore a variety of everyday processes and methods of coercion that widen the boundaries and definition of authoritarianism beyond the violence inflicted on its victims. The investigations and the debates that developed during the years of transitional justice since the institution of the Equity and Reconstruction Commission in 2004 have brought to the public's attention the physical violence, torture, and arbitrary detention in secret prisons of young activists and officers involved in the several attempted coups against the monarch in the 1960s and '70s. Abk's souvenirs from his business activities during the 1960s, and his subsequent return to work in institutions, provided me with a starting point from which to explore the ways in which coercion was applied to the elites. In 1966 Abk was appointed general director of the Deposit and Management Fund (*Caisse des Dépôts et de Gestion—CDG*), the main instrument of monetary policy in Morocco. The discussion I developed with him, starting from his documental traces, helped me reconstruct the meanings of such an experience. His appointment as the head of the CDG was both a promotion and a form of repression as it led him away from his activity as a journalist at a time when the newspaper he was running had become one of the rare political forums which escaped censorship. Taking on a managerial role in such an important institution meant that Abk had to change his social relations and attend the royal court, respecting its rules and conducting himself appropriately. This experience, which he remembers with a great deal of pain, forced him to share the table with actors he saw as emblematic of the regime he contested, some of whom were the material executors of the suffering or disappearance of the people closest to him.

Approaching biography as fieldwork also allowed me to conduct an ethnographic review of the weight of the past in Abk's present life, in the sense that Michael Burawoy attributes to this notion: "studying others in space and time, with a view to comparing his or her site with the same one studied at an earlier point in time" (2003, 646). The development of our work together strengthened our relationship and deepened our intimacy. These were crucial premises for my fieldwork exploring Abk's experience. Within this exploration his role was that of a witness. The fact that we reflexively discussed the reasons that caused him to remember things, the ways he wanted to tell his story, the logic behind

the collection of objects in his personal archive and their classification, and the historical moments and social configurations that accompanied his effort transformed the biographic fieldwork into a cognitive site from which I was able to draw questions. An example of this dialogic process is the questions that allowed us to explore the multiple political meanings of Abk's memories associated with his promotions, which he had always faced painfully since he considers that when he accepted the promotion he was allowing the regime to recuperate him.

## Discrete Perspectives on Political Change

Focusing on contemporary China, Prasenjit Duara (1996) invites us to consider the role of nationalism in the production of a linear understanding of history that is, in turn, constitutive of the nation-state. In Duara's terms, "rescuing history from the nation" means exploring the recent past by revealing contestation, appropriation, and pluralism. By analogy, the approach I developed was a way for me to rescue biography from the nation and explore political change beyond taken-for-granted conceptions of the nation-state and its trajectories of change. This perspective implies conceiving the nation-state not as an empty space with pre-established borders but as an ongoing process that can be explored through the experience of flesh-and-blood actors, following the chain of connections between periods, actors, and phenomena that a single trace could evoke. The biographic approach I experimented with through this work led me to explore three levels of analysis that might be of some use beyond Abk's experience and my work on it, or what I have come to call some discrete perspectives on political change.

The first of these is the discontinuity perspective. Moving away from linearity and the accomplishment of political experiences, avoiding strong causality and accredited chronologies can help in exploring politics as undefined phenomena beyond predefined horizons of change. Focusing on the traces of a single actor can overcome the long-term perspective generally adopted in thinking about paradigmatic change. By adopting the timescale of a single life, one can explore the different ways in which a shared social and political language (in my case, the language

of the nation) can be appropriated and enunciated. From a discontinuity perspective, one can pay attention to the different experiences, rather than the episodes, that a single actor has lived. Experiences offer insights not into the plot that is presumed to orient political change, but rather into some of the phenomena that constitute such processes. The connatural incompleteness of experiences is never synonymous with the lack of accomplishment, but refers to a way we can think of political change as an unplanned process, unpredictable and unlikely to find definitive fulfillment.

The second perspective is what one might call the marginality or irrelevance of political change. Exploring biography as an archive and establishing a piece of biographical fieldwork leads to a move away from actors and questions that are generally considered “relevant” and helps in exploring the mutual relations among actors without seeing the structure of social configurations as ineluctable. From this perspective, the distinction between actors who hold the power and those who resist it is less interesting than the power configuration (Hibou 2011). Similarly, actors’ roles themselves are less important than the concrete practices by which single actors exercise their roles and the plural meanings they attribute to such experiences, even those considered irrelevant or marginal. Ambivalences in these meanings are to be considered seriously. Beyond the fluidity and informality that characterize social configurations, the interest is not in discovering a presumed deep structure of power or its invisible dimension, but rather different practices that are generally not accounted for, since they are seen as having marginal importance in thinking about political change.

The third level of analysis that seems meaningful for exploring political change is the discreet, or personal, perspective. It is of course necessary to admit that memories do not tell us what actually happened: they tell us how people remember, how they frame their experiences in retrospect, and how these impact on their present life. Far from being something of residual interest, this is the very experience of politics. Paying attention to personal ways of conserving memory, remembering, and revealing political experiences leads to approaching politics as a real phenomenon that is hard to fit into formal models of explanation. If politics is real, its experience cannot be objective or univocal, and must rather be subjective and

plural. Subjectivity and plurality are relevant objects of inquiry for understanding political change. By considering biography as an archive and as a piece of fieldwork, one is able to explore not only non-hegemonic accounts of political change, but also, and most importantly, the tension between hegemonic memory and personal experience. It is not a matter of unveiling an anti-hegemonic account of the nation in opposition to the hegemonic one, nor of exploring a subaltern experience. The interest is rather in understanding the tension between the collective memory surrounding political change and personal experiences of it in order to explore the ways in which one can participate in a hegemonic paradigm while retaining a discreet experience of change.

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