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May in Morocco

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I have just returned from an inspiring trip to Rabat and Marrakech, where the massive, peaceful, demonstrations of the February 20th Movement (the Moroccan incarnation of the Arab Spring) has opened up a space of relative freedom for people to breathe free, demonstrate their grievances and discuss their ideas in print and in public. It is an exciting place to be, where every day new groups are getting organized and putting forward their grievances. During my two weeks in the country, I saw demonstrations — long banned under an oppressive police-state — nearly every time I went out for the day. One day I came upon a large group of men dressed all in white carrying banners and chanting (in Arabic of course). By their garb, they appeared to me to be members of some Moslem sect I had not yet encounter, Sufis perhaps? But when I got up close, I saw they were medical personnel, mostly public health doctors, dressed in surgical garb, demonstrating for better pay and more funding for their clinics.

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You don't read much about the ongoing struggle for democracy in Morocco, mainly I suppose because of the lack of violence. Of course the terrorist bomb attack on the main square of Marrakech, which I missed by a day, did make headlines. In Morocco it was feared that the tragedy would be used to clamp down on the movement (and rumoured that elements of the DST secret police may have been involved), but King Mohammed VI remained calm, and the comrades of February 20th Movement organized a hugely successful mass demonstration in Marrakech against terrorism at the site of the bombing, proclaiming their democratic and non-violent goals.

The Monarchy

Morocco is an authoritarian monarchy, and although it has a parliament, His Highness Mohammed VI holds a monopoly of temporal and (as Commander of the Faithful) spiritual power. Descended both from a long line of Sultans and from the Prophet Himself, the Monarch's person is sacred. Only yesterday, May 23, was taboo on the Monarch's sacred person broken for the first time when a demonstration of unemployed youth greeted the Mohammed VI, on his daily public appearance after saying noonday prayers, with their protests and demands. The Moroccan Monarchy also has an aureole of political legitimacy as the incarnation of the nation. At the end of WWII, Sultan Mohammed V raised the cause of independence from the French.

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The French Protectorate replaced him with a rival and exiled him to Madagascar, but he eventually came to power on the force of a mass movement ('The Revolution of the King and the People'), and ruled with the participation of progressives, including the outstanding revolutionaries like the Jewish Trotskyist engineer Abraham Serfaty and

the popular radical Left nationalist Ahmed ben Barka.

In 1961 Mohammed V was succeeded by his son, Hassan II, an authoritarian monster whose power base was in the traditional reactionary landowning classes. Hassan II threw Serfaty in jail, had him tortured, and left him there to rot. Ben Barka was kidnapped in Paris with the complicity of the French secret police and turned over to Hassan II who had him tortured to death. Hassan II's reign of terror — supported by the CIA, Israel, and the French DST — lasted 40 years, although in 1991 he did let up, released some prisoners, and allowed some exiles to return. He died in 1999, leaving the country in the hands of the Mahkzen — an occult nexus of Palace officials, Army officers, the DST (political police), wealthy magnates, local chieftains and their clients — who monopolise the levers of power at every level.

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Hassan II's successor, the youthful Mohammed VI, seems a decent sort and may have aspired to imitate Juan Carlos I, the Spanish Crown Prince who liberalized his country as soon as Franco died. He even went so far, in 2006, as to officially decree the equality of women in Morocco. But the all-powerful social and political structure of the Mahkzen remains in power, with a charade of alternating parties in a sham parliament and few civil liberties, and the equality of women, like other reforms, has not been enforced. Meanwhile, social inequality keeps increasing, while the government spends billions on building a totally unnecessary luxury high-speed TGV train from Tangiers to Agadir when what is needed are roads, clinics, schools and jobs.

The Monarchy's response to the Arab Spring has been extremely judicious. When the demonstrations spread across the country on February 20, the government recognized the demand for redress of grievances and did not resort to slander or harsh repression like the despots in other Arab countries. (On the other hand, the next day the police quietly and selectively beat up on demonstrations and meetings that were continuing the movement.) Rapidly, on March 9, Mohammed VI took back the initiative with a major speech in which he raised the minimum wage by 15% (over two years), increased scholarships for students, raised the pay of civil servants including the Army, called for a parliamentary commission to revise the Constitution and set June 24 as the date for a referendum.

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His Majesty also, in the name of Human Rights (and I suppose in his role as Commander of the Faithful), pardoned a large number of heretics — Islamic Fundamentalists (or 'Salifists' as they are called in Morocco) who had been arrested en masse after a horrible terrorist bombing in Casablanca in 2005 and left to rot in jail by the thousands. Curiously, many of these revenants sheiks have, on their

release, acknowledged the role of the February 20 movement in their release, and some have agreed to abide by its principles of secular democracy, human rights and female equality. Indeed, the Islamist Al Adl Wal movement, descended from Suffi Fundamentalist Shiek Yassine, provides the February 20 movement with much of its strength and respects its discipline. (There is also a loyalist official moderate Islamist party represented in Parliament which does not support the February 20 Movement, and reactionary Salafists who try to take over protests).

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The February 20 Movement

Meanwhile, the spontaneous February 20 Movement had been moving ahead, getting organized on line and on the ground, pushing forward the boundaries of protest, bringing together a coalition, and somehow, using Facebook, developing its ten-point program. This young Movement, which started among young students on Facebook and rode the wave of massive demonstrations sweeping the Arab world, owes its unity to this excellent ten-point program which all its adherents — including Marxists, Islamists, Human Rights fighters, etc — must observe. So the movement is very broad and heterodox, but united in action.

It's a kind of SDS-style do-it-yourself movement, and mostly things get organized via text-messages, cell-phones and the like. February 20 has so far been able to keep up the strength of its demonstrations, and is now moving towards deepening its roots in the community and countryside. There are General Assemblies in every locality and the young activists stay up late arguing principles and trying to find consensus. (Everybody gets to talk. It takes time). There are also great on-line newspapers in Arabic and French, like Ali Lmrabet's DEMAIN, now back in business.

http://www.emarrakech.info/Demain-on-line_a55316.html and discussion sites like <http://www.mamfakinch.com/> (where I occasionally post). And credit should go to Al Jazeera (which you can get in English on line and via satellite) for propagating the revolutionary seeds of the Arab Spring by its, to my mind, totally professional and un-biased coverage (check out the Al Jazeera Washington bureau for balanced and objective US news!)

May Day in Rabat

I did get to participate in the May Day demonstration in Morocco, as I had hoped in my previous article, but it was somewhat of a let down. Partly because it was cold and rainy in Rabat and I had arrived with tropical-type clothes and got totally chilled. But mainly because I discovered that the Moroccan trade-union movement is so deeply divided, that there were four separate May Day parades — despite efforts to unite. Two of the federations are openly allied with the government, and the February 20 people divided their marchers between

the two other, more progressive groups. Moreover, turnout was poor as the majority of unionised workers, disappointed with their leadership, stayed at home. Clearly, the spreading Egyptian movement of self-organised unions has not yet reached Morocco. On the other hand, it was a thrill to march with February 20th contingent, with young and old, workers and students, women in headscarves and bare-armed, bare-headed co-eds in Hippie-style garb shouting out the slogans from the back of a slow-moving truck. Curiously, the 'nastiest' slogans (mentioning by name actual corrupt officials) came from the Islamist ranks.

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A few days later, I had the opportunity to give a talk at the Benslimane section of the Moroccan Human Rights Association (my French translated into Arabic!). Of course whenever I talk with Arab comrades (we have a Committee to defend the Arab revolutions here in Montpellier, where there are 40,000 Moroccans living) I like to tell them about the Wisconsin Effect and how delightfully ironic it is that 'The Arabs are teaching us Americans about democracy!' It's a great ice-breaker and sets up the next point: we're all together fighting back against the international neo-liberal reactionary capitalist offensive. (They videoed the meeting, and I hope it will be on U-Tube soon).

My talk was held in the Benslimane 'House of Books,' and the occasion was a book-launch for the Arabic publication of Raya Dunayevskaya's *MARXISM AND FREEDOM*, which was sponsored by the Victor Serge Foundation (which paid for the translation) and introduced by Maâti Monjib and myself. I am pleased to say we sold 38 copies at the meeting and that of the whole edition of 3000 copies, only 400 were returned — which is pretty amazing in Moroccan publishing. Maâti says that in Morocco they count five readers for every book, which means more than 12,000 Moroccans may soon have read this Marxist-humanist classic. It couldn't have come at a better time. I've asked a couple of comrades to review it in Arabic, and we are hoping to have the Arabic text available on line soon, as well as to promote editions in Egypt and/or Lebanon if possible. (Any leads?) The Arab Spring has proven once again that revolution from below is possible: the crucial question is 'What happens after?' and books like Dunayevskaya's (and Serge's, which are next to be translated into Arabic) are needed to fill the theoretical void, which will otherwise be filled by harmful ideologies.

Indeed, the assigned subject, 'Human Rights and Left Ideologies,' gave me the opportunity to dismiss ALL ideologies — free market, Islamist, totalitarian communist, nationalist etc. — as forms of false consciousness rationalising the power of one or another ruling class. All these ideologies are oppressive; what is needed is a PHILOSOPHY of Freedom.

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Women as Subject

As for the 'human rights' part of the topic, I took as my text Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic, where the Master knows only his privilege and arbitrary will, while the slave, revolting against her oppression, discovers a mind of her own. This went over very well with my audience, half of whom were women wearing head scarves. Especially when I used 'husband' and 'brother' along with 'Pharaoh' as examples of the Master. (I could hear Raya's cackling laugh when that one went over). So human rights became a question of Subject, of womens' revolt and self-activity, rather than an object, something handed down by the UN.

I also tried to make the point that the best way to overcome the influence of Salafism (reactionary Islamism) is NOT to polemicize (which would be accepting the opponent's GROUND for debate) but to undermine Salafism by insisting on women's equality, women's rights. As the women in headscarves lined up for me to sign their copies (I guess as Prefacer) of Raya's book in Arabic, I wished I could speak Arabic and had had more time to talk with them individually. One thing I learned, however, is that in Morocco what a woman puts on her head doesn't necessarily tell you what's going on IN her head.

It is increasingly clear that women's' rights are central to the developing social revolution in the Arab world, and the revolutionaries of the February 20th Movement I met in Rabat and Marrakech all seemed very much aware of this priority. For them, it is no longer a question of solving the 'women question' AFTER the revolution, but of putting it first, at the cutting edge of the struggle. 'Women as vanguard' if you will. (This is also the line of the senior leaders of La Voie démocratique, the historic Marxist (more or less Trotskyist) party in Morocco, with whom I spoke.) This is certainly a big step forward. So is the recognition of mass creativity FROM BELOW on the part of these old Marxist fighters (many of whom endured prison and torture during the 'years of lead' under Hassan II) as they move forward to incorporate a new generation, deepen their roots by eliciting the grievances of the people and helping them organize during this period of tentative freedom.

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Non-Violence and Internationalism

Another wonderful aspect of this amazing Arab Spring is the generalized reliance on non-violence, which is proving more and more effective even in countries like Syria and Yemen, where women have continued to play a major role despite the violence of the governments' crackdown and the traditions of a gun-toting tribal society. It is wonderful to see the U.S. media stereotype of the Violent Arab Maniac exploded by this historic outpouring of self-disciplined mass non-violent struggle across a whole region. Much

has been made (for example by the N.Y. Times) of the contribution of foreign non-violent strategists like Vermont Professor Gene Clark, but it turns out that the Islamic world had it's own historic non-violent role-model in Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the 'frontier Ghandi,' who according to Michael Shank (*the Nation* March 16) 'built a 100,000 strong non-violent resistance movement out of local tribal people' among the Pashtouns on the Pakistani-Afghanistan border – an arbitrary frontier imposed by the British the better to divide and rule the Pashtouns. According to Khan, 'Mohammed taught that a Moslem is one who never hurts anyone by word or deed.' The record of British atrocities against Khan's peaceful followers in the '20s was worthy of a Kadaffi. So much for the Clash of Civilizations.

The strength of the burgeoning democratic and social revolution in Morocco continues to depend in part on the strength of the ongoing international movement known as the Arab Spring. It would be wonderful if the Moroccan movement, having carved out a space of relative freedom in a stable land, could share it with activists from movements in the other Arab lands by hosting some kind of pan-Arab Spring Encounter where they could talk freely among themselves and begin to organize this powerful international revolution which up to now has mainly known itself 'virtually,' through the media and the Internet. The feeling of hospitality is strong in Arab culture, and one hopes that the Moroccan revolutionaries might think of paying their debt of solidarity to the Arab Spring by opening its harbor of peace (dar es Salaam) to comrades from other nations. This is a project I hope to see developing. Inch-Allah!