2005-05


Lindholm, Charles

Wiley-Blackwell

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3870

Boston University

CHARLES LINDHOLM
Boston University

This piece has been difficult to write, not only because of the impossibility of adequately reviewing a complex book in 750 words but also because in the book Lawrence Rosen characterizes some work of mine as slanderous, contradictory, illogical, and ill informed. After reading the book, I was wary of arousing even more vituperation; but I also wanted to respond and to justify myself. Submitting a harsh review would make Rosen’s enemies my allies, but it would also alienate his many friends. With these contradictory personal and situational factors to consider, how should I write the review? My answer is below.

According to Rosen, the situational personalizing of a supposedly objective task (as in the case, of a book review in a professional journal) is a typically Middle Eastern (or, at least, Moroccan) cultural stance. As he says in one of his better aphorisms, “It is the one who notices the thing, not the thing noticed, that counts” (p. 112). Obviously, as my first paragraph shows, this can occur outside the Middle East, as well. Nor are other traits, attitudes, or values to which he draws attention unfamiliar to Western readers: Among them are pervasive ambivalence, a sense of the corruption and the fragility of the social order, never-ending gamesmanship, self-promotion by any avenues possible, shifting alliances in the relentless pursuit of power, and a market model of human
relationships. This sounds suspiciously like a listing of the attributes of the public culture of U.S. capitalism in full flower.

A virtue of Rosen’s demanding, smart, insightful, sometimes dull, sometimes gnomic, and often exasperating book is that the author takes these symptoms of modern malaise and gives them a Moroccan flavor, spiced up by a cultural taste for absolutes, saints, case law, tribalism, symbolic reversals, and the verities of Islam, among other things. Morocco is, he says, like the West, but offset at a ten-degree angle: It seems familiar, but is never quite parallel, and becomes more and more different when looked at in depth. The metaphor is striking but hard to apply because cultures are not objects that can be put at angles to one another.

But Rosen is not put off by such difficulties. His sprawling and disjointed text is loosely unified by its similes, because what he really hopes to provide are new, more “supple” and “subtle” tropes that can do justice to the malleability and flexibility he sees as fundamental to Moroccan culture. Anthropologists must, he says, “move away from images of crystalline structures and catalogable logics to new and more suggestive images” (p. 125). For those who are unfamiliar with the debates, what is rejected here is the traditional anthropological fascination with tribal segmentary lineage organization, even though that organization, as an indigenous cultural metaphor, offers precisely the flexibility and malleability desired. But Rosen works primarily among middle-class cosmopolitan urbanites who run their own businesses or work for the state, pursue complex court cases, get divorced, have homes in Europe, and drive Mercedes—or so the sparse ethnography offered seems to indicate. That he should look for something new to reflect the entrepreneurial lives of his informants, then, makes sense.
The central trope (a cognitive anthropologist would call it a “schema”) that he comes up with is that the Moroccan social world (and, by extension, the social order of the Middle East—although not of Islam, despite the overly ambitious claims of the title) resembles an amoeba: ever changing and adapting yet flexible and with a degree of internal cohesion. This is a world that is open-ended, constantly in flux, as the maximizing individuals who make it up are busily extending their social networks by any means possible. Such shapelessness would be extraordinary even for an amoeba. The reason this fluid world does not melt away into the desert is that Moroccan social life is also constituted as a “Great Game” much like chess, in which all of the players know the rules (although the reader never quite finds out what they are), but each plays in a different way. The character type that emerges from this mixed metaphor is curiously bloodless. It consists of “a set of situated and negotiable encounters with others” (p. 59).

There is much to admire in this complicated, amorphous, and challenging book that so resembles the amoeba it describes. The author presents his central argument with vigor; he clearly knows his world, and he has attempted honorably to imagine it anew. At the same time, beneath it all, his understanding of Morocco is surprisingly similar to that of previous writers. As far as I am concerned, that is another positive aspect of his work.