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Morocco and Rural Change

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

From Senegal to France, France to Spain, Spain to Morocco. The voyager who takes this route finds Morocco to be more southern European than north African. In Toledo he looks at the blended Moorish and Spanish architecture of the Fifteenth Century while a guide boasts, as if it were only yesterday, of the glories of Los Reyes Catolicos who drove the Moors from Spain; the same architecture appears again, deep in the interior of Morocco, in the ancient city of Fes, settled in part by Moors fleeing from Spain. Cut off from the rest of Africa by the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara, Morocco has gone its own way in relative isolation, most of its contacts with the outside world being with Europe. France came late and left early. The French conquest was not complete until 1934, and Morocco became independent in 1956.

By African standards, Morocco is remarkably well off. France built a fine network of all-weather roads. Most important, the land is good and there is plenty of it, including much that is unused. Except in the bad years, Morocco is self-sufficient in most foods. The statistics show the Moroccan average diet to be fairly adequate, much better than most of Africa. (The average of course includes some who go hungry and some who gorge.) Of the twelve million acres under cultivation, about two million are owned by European settlers whose productivity is much higher than that of the Moroccan farmers. One-fourth of the Moroccan-held farmland is owned by absentee landlords and farmed by sharecroppers who get one-fifth of the crop. (The French agronomist Rene Dumont notes that the Greek sharecropper in the Age of Pericles got one-sixth of the crop and that his productivity was probably higher. "Social progress is slow around the Mediterranean," Dumont comments.) The landlord may be almost as poor as his sharecropper, but, for reasons of social status, he prefers idleness in poverty to working his own land.

Blessed by nature above most of the underdeveloped nations, Morocco, it would seem, could increase her agricultural production relatively easily. What has happened? Since Morocco became independent in 1956, despite some massive government projects, agricultural production has failed to increase. But the population has increased by close to twenty percent. Morocco now produces less per capita than it did under the French.

Why? Of course, some European farmers have left, and erosion washes away its 75,000 hectares of good land every year - but the reasons

run deeper than just those two factors. Let us look at what Morocco has done.

The government's first and most grandiose project was "Operation Labour" (Operation Plow), launched in 1957. The late King Mohamed V drove the first tractor, and his son, now King Moulay Hassan II, soon announced that Operation Labour "had solved" (not, mind you, "would" but "had" solved) Morocco's rural problems. The idea was that the government would send tractors to plow the peasant's fields, and would supply him with improved seed, fertilizer and advice. The advice was free; the cost of the plowing, seed and fertilizer was to be repaid by the peasant at harvest time. By 1964, according to the Plan, Operation Labour was to cover 1.7 million acres, one-sixth of Morocco's farmland. In the early years, the government claimed that yields were being increased by 50 to 100 percent.

But, by the summer of 1962, Operation Labour was widely considered to be a failure. It was undergoing a labyrinthine administrative reorganization, and the government's enthusiasm had shifted to other projects. What went wrong, according to the various accounts I have heard, was just about everything. The peasants were not prepared for the changes involved in switching from traditional to mechanized farming. The government gave them wheat, about which they knew nothing, instead of barley, which they knew. Peasant resistance to Operation Labour increased as they found it was costing them more than it brought them in increased yields. Add in a good dose of corruption, favoritism and administrative and mechanical inefficiency - normal in a new nation - and there are sufficient reasons for the failure of Operation Labour. And, beyond its failures, Operation Labour had dismal side effects. Moroccan peasants and draft animals are already greatly underemployed. Mechanization causes more underemployment. In those same years, a tractor factory was started. This, too, was a failure, and the factory closed down after a year and a half.

This year the government launched a major irrigation project. Morocco has plenty of water available, and most of it is unused. A new government organization, the Office Nationale des Irrigations, was created to develop the irrigable areas. The ONI will run a highly centralized operation that will press heavily on the Moroccan peasant. Land will be redistributed into economic parcels, the peasants will have to be initiated to new crops and new techniques. (The government recently produced a movie to show the peasants how it's done.) The ONI will need much capital, and many technicians and administrators. It will involve less than 10 percent of the peasant population.

The ONI's major responsibility is a project to plant 120,000 acres to sugar beets. Sugar constitutes 10 percent of Morocco's imports; the country suffered greatly during World War II when sugar imports were cut off. The ONI project is not an economic one. Morocco pays about 7¢ a kilo for imported sugar. The government calculates that if all goes well (if!) its domestic sugar will cost 9¢ a kilo. Why has the government

set out on this rather dubious project when there is so much else to be done? The reasons I was offered were fear of another sugar shortage, national prestige, empire-building by the officials involved.

To occupy the unemployed and underemployed, Morocco has started a WPA-style operation called "Promotion Nationale". Those drafted for Promotion Nationale will work on jobs of national interest such as road and school construction. They will be paid half in cash and half in food, mostly U.S. surplus. (U.S. food, though it staved off a famine in the 1961 drought, seems to have a depressing effect on local production. When free food comes in from the outside, the farmers grow less.) Like the ONI and Operation Labour, Promotion Nationale is a highly centralized operation requiring much administration.

To divert the peasants of the Riff Mountains in the north from their current cash crop - marijuana - Morocco called in the Food and Agriculture Organization. The government has been buying the marijuana to keep it off the market, but this is not considered a long-range solution. Now, at a cost to Morocco and the FAO of \$2 million, an FAO team has produced a plan for the Riff. Up in Fes, I found Harold Bromley, administrator of the FAO team, full of optimism. The plan, he said, will raise income in the Riff (not from marijuana) by 20 percent in five years; the Moroccan government is cooperating, a demonstration farm will be started, and the peasants - he felt sure - will adopt the techniques on display there. I mentioned that we had just driven through the rich valley north of Meknes where Moroccan and European farms have been side by side, sometimes for as long as 30 years. The European farmers get much higher yields, per acre and per dollar, than their neighbors. Some of the Europeans' techniques are beyond the means of the Moroccans, but many are not: clearing rocks from the fields is a simple example. Yet in all those years the Moroccans have adopted none of the methods on display right next to them. Bromley said this was because the Moroccans were suspicious of foreigners, and that it would be different in the Riff, where the peasants will be taught by Moroccans.

Things have not been so different in some of Morocco's big and expensive irrigation projects. At Imfout and Tadla, the peasants have already abandoned the new crops that were supposed to quadruple their income, and at Doukkala the peasants' experience was so disastrous that some irrigated land is being sold for less than dry land. On paper, and on the experimental farms, each of these projects is economically viable; in practice, and on the peasants' farms, none of them has been worth the investment. "Technical errors," say the technicians, and this is the view apparently adopted by the Moroccan government.

A different view is taken by a small international development organization known as IRAM - Institut de Recherche et d'Application des Methodes de Developpement. The IRAM's methods, now being used in Senegal and elsewhere in Africa, were pioneered in Morocco. The IRAM's thesis, greatly oversimplified, is that a profound change in peasant attitudes must precede technological change. The IRAM's report on the Doukkala

project concluded: "We are faced with a population whose traditional psychological attitudes, instead of opening them to new forms of behavior determined by technicians, keeps them closed in on themselves. Only a profound transformation, creating a totally new climate, can change their ways..." Fine, but how do you accomplish it? The IRAM goes about it (we will look at their methods in greater detail in a later report) by trying to uncover peasant leaders in a community that is a natural economic unit and that has possibilities for rapid though modest improvement. After the peasants have, in discussions with the IRAM representative, decided what they want for the community, the IRAM provides them with minimum technical assistance. The peasants then carry out their own projects, sometimes individually, sometimes collectively. In this way, the IRAM hopes, the idea of change can be introduced within the framework of traditional society, and the idle capacities of the community can be mobilized. The method is slow, but it is cheap: it requires virtually no capital, few technicians, little administration. And it offers the theoretical possibility that eventually it can be self-sustaining without outside pressure.

The IRAM's four years in Morocco offer an ambiguous lesson. They began with the support of the government. In the early years, the IRAM believes, the results were encouraging; modest progress was being made in the few communities where they were working. But awakened peasants make greater demands and carry in them the seeds of social change. The IRAM ran into increasing opposition from local potentates and somnolent administrators. At the same time, Mohamed V ousted the more socialist of his ministers. The IRAM got no local participation, and its European members were caught up in the tense post-independence relations between French and Moroccan. Eventually the government dropped its contract with IRAM. The IRAM teams were pulled out of the countryside and the peasants left to themselves. Nowadays the IRAM office in Rabat hears rumors that "their" peasants in the Marrakesh area still meet occasionally in an effort to hold their group together. In place of their original contract, the government then offered IRAM a place in the ONI irrigation project. Although the ONI's methods run directly counter to those of the IRAM, the IRAM decided to accept the offer, mainly in order to keep a foothold in Morocco. But the IRAM people do not seem very optimistic about their role in the ONI.

The IRAM experiment, then, was killed in the cradle by the government of Morocco. Instead the government has chosen to try to impose economic change through its administrative machinery. The tone of that administration is inevitably set by the nation's absolute political and religious chief, King Moulay Hassan II. The King (who, be it noted, gets \$20 million annually in cash from the U.S.) has palaces all over the country and his personal garage contains 113 - one hundred and thirteen! - automobiles.

Recently the Moroccan government announced plans for a second tractor factory to replace the one that failed. Rene Dumont's chapter on Morocco in "Terres Vivantes" was titled: "Does Morocco Deserve its Tractors?" The question is still valid.

Sincerely,

David Hapgood