



Transmediterranean Political Socialisation: The Hirak Movement, the Moroccan Diaspora and Europe as a Political Imaginary

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In 2017, after the death of Mohsen Fikri, a Rifian fishmonger from Al Hoceima, a protest movement began to emerge both inside and outside Morocco, the Hirak, which well illustrates the complex socioeconomic and political entanglements produced by the migration processes in the Mediterranean basin. The Hirak calls for greater economic and social investment in the Rif region by the Moroccan government, as well as the freeing of political prisoners of the cause and the inclusion of collective memory of the region in the history of Morocco. Most European emigration comes from the Rif, so in recent years the mobilization of the diaspora in numerous European countries has been very significant. The Hirak movement is a very interesting case of transnational European citizenship, as the activists and sympathizers do not see a conflict between their European citizenship and their Rifian or Moroccan identity.

Introduction

In 2017, Morocco witnessed the biggest social protests since the so-called “Arab Spring”. Unlike then, the focal points now lie in the marginalized rural periphery, especially in the Rif, the Mediterranean coastal region in the North, which also shows the highest rate of migration to Europe. Here, a massive protest movement, the Hirak, formed after the death of 31-year-old Mohsen Fikri, a poor fishmonger in the port city Al Hoceima, in October 2016.

In comparison to the Arab Spring protest in 2011, the Hirak managed to mobilize the Moroccan diaspora in Europe to a much greater degree, particularly those of Rifi origin, not least because the Rif is the Moroccan region with the highest quota of migration to Europe. The Hirak movement is a relevant case in point for Mediterranean studies, both regarding questions of spatiality and temporality. On the one hand, it illustrates the complex socioeconomic and political entanglements that migration processes across the Mediterranean



produce. On the other, it points to the long-lasting material and political effects of Spanish and French colonial rule, and the processes of collective memory and historical imaginaries they entail. Furthermore, it provides a highly interesting case that allows for an analysis of the role of transnational migration in political socialization, and the political relevance of the concomitant overlay of different national, regional and local identities and identifications. It is thus a productive empirical point of departure for a more general dialog between area studies and the disciplines that allows reflection on predominant concepts of political socialization and their methodological nationalism.

To many, Fikri's death epitomizes the socioeconomic precariousness of the younger generations and the rampant corruption and abuse of authority in Morocco in general, and in the Rif in particular

Based on life stories with activists, participant observation and informal talks, this article looks into the political socialization of Hirak support activists, particularly in relation to questions of collective memory and migration.

The Hirak Movement and Collective Memory

The movement that became known as the Hirak (People's Movement or Rif Movement) formed after the death of 31-year-old Mohsen Fikri, a poor fishmonger in the port city Al Hoceima, in October 2016. Fikri had bought a load of swordfish, which the police, who apparently wanted to extort bribes, confiscated, arguing it had been fished illegally. When they threw the load into a garbage truck, Fikri jumped in after it in an attempt to save his goods. One of the police officers allegedly gave order to

activate the garbage compactor and Fikri was crushed. To many, his death epitomizes the socioeconomic precariousness of the younger generations and the rampant corruption and abuse of authority in Morocco in general, and in the Rif in particular.

Accordingly, the manifesto that the Hirak movement discussed and expanded upon in open assemblies and presented to the Moroccan public contains first and foremost very detailed socioeconomic demands such as governmental investments in the structures of the local fishing industry. The Hirak also insists that the banks in the Rif invest the vast remittances they receive from the diaspora in local development, and not in prestigious projects in the Moroccan cities of Casablanca or Rabat. Furthermore, the movement campaigns for the establishment of a hospital with an oncology center – a demand that points to colonial history. The cancer rate in the Rif – the highest in the country – is most likely a result of remnants of mustard gas that the Spanish army deployed massively in the war against the Rif Republic (1921–1926), proclaimed by the charismatic Abdelkrim al-Khattabi who had managed to unite the Rif people. The guerilla army that he had recruited from the villages of the region had inflicted serious losses on the colonial troops and driven them back to the enclave of Melilla. In response, the Spanish army released around 500 tons of mustard gas over the region, and it is believed that groundwater is still contaminated in many areas. Historians consider the Rif War to be the first aero chemical war in history, and probably the first time ever poison gas missions were carried out against a civilian population: markets, fields and villages were targeted in attacks, during which the mustard gas cartridges were mostly dropped from planes (Kunz and Müller, 1990; Balfour, 2002).

Only with the use of toxic gas, and with the military support of France, which had occupied most of Morocco, and the troops of



Sultan Yousef, who aimed to regain control over the Rif, could the Spaniards secure their rule over the region for another two decades. In 1956, the year of Moroccan independence, Spain finally handed the Rif over to the newly appointed King Mohammed V. In reaction, Abdelkrim Al-Khatibi, who had been exiled since his defeat in 1926, addressed the newly appointed government with the question: “Are you a government or a gang?”

A public statement by professors of social sciences and university members in June 2017 made it clear that the problems the movement scandalizes affect the whole country and could be raised in a similar way by citizens in many places in Morocco

Shortly after independence, in 1958, an uprising broke out in the Rif, which King Mohamed V brutally suppressed with the army. His son, then Crown Prince Hassan, led the military action. In 1984, another uprising developed after social protests, and once again, Hassan II, now himself incumbent of the Moroccan throne, let the tanks roll up and insulted the demonstrators on television as “vermin”. His son, Mohamed VI, in turn made attempts to reconcile the relations between the central power and the Rif. However, to Hirak activists this is an unfinished reconciliation at best, since the monarchy’s initiatives only benefitted a small local elite (Suárez Collado, 2017b, 2018).

“Are you a government or a gang?” Sixty years after independence, Abdelkrim’s provocative question has once again been echoing against the Moroccan government, in the slogans of the Hirak movement. Abdelkrim’s

portrait and the flag of the Rif Republic are omnipresent in the protests, and they give the movement a strong dimension of historical memory.

Against the historical background of decades of confrontation with the central authority, it is not surprising that the *makhzen* – the monarchy’s network of patronage and control¹ – and government-related media soon defamed the movement as foreign-controlled and violent separatists. However, the Hirak is far from demanding independence but precisely calls on the government in Rabat to end the marginalization of the periphery, to assume its responsibility, to invest in the region and to improve the socioeconomic situation there.

With this approach, the Hirak movement had garnered support for its demands well beyond the Rif. A public statement by professors of social sciences and university members in June 2017 made it clear that the problems the movement scandalizes affect the whole country and could be raised in a similar way by citizens in many places in Morocco (Tel Quel, 2017). Accordingly, the solidarity marches that year in Casablanca and Rabat, with tens of thousands participants, were the biggest demonstrations since 2011, and much like then they united very different political factions, from leftists to democrats and Islamists. They thus proved that, unlike in 1959 or 1984, the Rif is not protesting alone this time, and that the massive repression and intimidation with which the government overruns the Hirak movement does not go unobserved.

The movement managed to uphold its protests throughout 2017, despite massive repression by the central government and the detention of many activists, among them its

1. “*Makhzen*, for most Moroccans, is an apparatus of state violence and domination, and at the same time a system of representation of traditional royal power. *Makhzen* is also a system of conflict resolution controlled by the king, who dominates all fields of the social universe. It evokes fear, awe and respect in the Moroccan political culture and refers to a patrimonial institution that has managed to adapt to the realities of modern Moroccan politics. A clear conception of *Makhzen* is still elusive and, to grasp its meaning, a cursory look at its origins and historical development seems necessary at this point” (Daadaoui, 2016: 41-42).



most prominent voice, Nasser Zafzafi. In summer 2018, members of the Hirak leadership were sentenced to prison terms up to 20 years. The lawyers appealed but the verdict was confirmed by the Moroccan courts in spring 2019. Many Moroccans consider this a return to the “Years of Lead”, as the phase of violent repression of dissent under the former King Hassan II was termed.

Transnational Mobilization

In comparison to the “Arab Spring” protest in 2011, the Hirak managed to mobilize the Moroccan diaspora in Europe to a much greater degree, particularly those of Rifi origin (Dumont, 2016; Schwarz, 2018). The Rif is the Moroccan region with the highest quota of migration to Europe, and already in parallel to the first Hirak mobilizations, a Mohsen Fikri Committee in Brussels had called for a protest vigil in early November 2016. Shortly after that, Hirak support committees started to mushroom in many cities with a significant Moroccan diaspora across Europe, i.e. in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and Germany. The activists, mostly of Rifi origin, build their networks on social media platforms, but committees also frequently visit each other personally, for demonstrations and protests in front of Moroccan embassies and consulates, as well as in front of the European Parliament in Brussels and Strasbourg. They thus offer a particularly promising point of departure to reflect on certain problems regarding the conceptualization of political socialization.

Political Socialization, Spatiality and Temporality

Most political socialization research has so far relied on an understanding of citizenship

and the nation state that largely excluded the experience of migration, transnational biographies, and the hybridity of identities, resulting in a prevalence of methodological nationalism (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2008). This is not only problematic with regard to the transferability of the methods and basic assumptions of political socialization research to societies of the Global South, such as North Africa and West Asia (NAWA), but also for the findings on the Global North itself, even more so against the background of the refugee movements to Europe since 2011, and the general history of migration to Europe from this region. In area studies, space is usually conceptualized as relational, dynamic and de-territorial (Massey, 2005; Schwedler, 2013). This engagement with space also holds questions with regard to temporality. Long-held assumptions of political socialization research, such as when the process of political socialization comes to an end, and how political values are passed on from generation to generation, are often turned upside down by mobility between geopolitical spaces and the experience of different political institutions and cultures. For example, Wong and Tseng (2007) for the USA show how immigrants’ children often “re-socialize” their parents politically. Other scholars even conceptualize migration as a further, independent (political) socialization process (Paul, 2013; Pachi et al., 2017). Regarding identity, sense of belonging and citizenship, spatial imaginaries from different epochs are highly important in forming a reservoir of identity reference points that can be reactivated again and again in new configurations, especially when a hegemonic structure is shaken (Hirschhausen, 2017).

Identities and Identifications

In European nation states, the preeminent concern of public discourse regarding ques-

tions of migration revolved around questions of “integration” of the newcomers and suspicions regarding their “loyalty” to the respective countries of arrival. In consequence, migrants’ political activism that aims at changes in their – or their families’ – countries of origin – sometimes referred to as homeland politics – has often been met with suspicion by the public, and remained understudied in academia (Beaugrand and Geisser, 2016; Suárez Collado, 2017a).

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Some activists, like Fatima² (42 years old) from Madrid, indeed report certain fears of her parents regarding a loss of their cultural identity and alienation from their children. She had migrated to Spain with her mother and her siblings at the age of 1, in order to join her father. In her youth, Fatima had very actively and consciously discussed and negotiated her identity with her peers and engaged in conflict with her parents. At the age of 16, she had founded an association with other teens of Moroccan origin, which would soon also include young people of Latin American origin, in order to reflect upon their situation as immigrants’ children in Spanish society. Together they even organized intergenerational workshops to discuss their situation with their parents: “There was an intergenerational activity where we had a debate [...] about how we, the sons and daughters, felt and how they felt. But we fathers and mothers, sons and

daughters, were having the same debate. It was incredible, amazing, and was not only with the Moroccan population, but also Latin [...]. It was incredible to see how the justifications of the fathers and mothers were the same, whether Moroccans, Colombians or Dominicans. In the end, our parents were afraid of the unknown and the unknown is the culture of the host country; that was the fear. [...] The fear was also that we might lose our origin, in other words, what for them was their origin, which is ours: loss of language, loss of identity, loss. They weren’t ready or no one had prepared them to understand that this identity is always under construction [...]. So, they forbade everything because of their origin, such as what are you doing? Hating your origin and also rejecting it, recklessly. The association helped us with this, to learn again that it’s wonderful to be of Moroccan origin. Now, at the age of 42, I’m really proud to be a native of Madrid and Amazigh. When it suits I can say I’m from the Rif and, when it suits, that I am from Madrid.”

Whereas Fatima’s parents were always very proud and conscious of their Rifi origin, to others the Hirak protests mark a key event to “discover” or “re-discover” their Rifian or Amazigh identity. Again, this does not necessarily create tensions over identification with the country of arrival. Take the case of Lahcen (37 years old), a member of a Hirak support committee in the Frankfurt region. He had migrated to Germany at the age of 6, in the course of family reunification. In an interview in May 2018, he stated that he had never been to a demonstration before. His parents are both from the Rif, and they had participated in demonstrations in support of the Palestinian cause before, but he was always uninterested. However, in 2017, he occasionally joined one of

2. All the names of interviewees were pseudonymized in order to protect their identity and the identity of the other persons they talk about.

the local protests in Frankfurt against the imprisonment of the Hirak activists. Immediately after that, he very avidly started to research the history of the region online, through Wikipedia and Facebook. He does not speak Arabic, only Tarifit and German, and as many of the posts on Facebook were in Arabic, he had to ask his wife for help, who is also from the Rif.

Lahcen declares: “I didn’t know anything, and then you actually notice, well, okay, that’s actually my identity. That’s us. And there it started, we searched Wikipedia, YouTube, searched for videos, looked at history, okay, what happened back then? I mean I already knew the history of Abdelkrim, but nothing before and nothing after. Then I looked at Wikipedia, the story went back a long way, almost to the Phoenicians. Okay, where do we come from, who are we? So my interest grew, okay, this is who we actually are, and why are they treating us like that? The Alawites or the rulers who are in power now, or the Arabs who are in power now. And when you look more into it, you just find this injustice towards us, and that is us. Why do they treat us like that? And because I grew up here and am actually very free in my head, it doesn’t fit into my head that they are like that. And when I realize that we are ready to let them rule us, but not like that. We are also the people, we also belong to Morocco, why should we call ourselves Moroccans and our history is not part of Moroccan history?”

What is noteworthy in this passage about a process of active search for his Rifian identity, is the relatedness, or in fact entanglement, of different identifications that to Lahcen are no contradiction. He strongly identifies with Amazigh or Rifian identity, but that does not mean he demands independence for the region. Instead, he insists on including the history of the Rif as part of Moroccan history. Furthermore, he emphasizes that one reason why he considers the treatment of the Imazighen as unjust is his political socialization in Germany

(“because I grew up here and I am actually very free in my head”).

More radical Rifian diaspora activists would surely not subscribe to such a position regarding the relation to Morocco. In fact, there is a rift within the Hirak support movement between, on the one hand, a faction that confines itself to the mostly socioeconomic demands of the Hirak itself and aims at alliances with Moroccans of non-Rifi origin and, on the other, a “republican” faction that campaigns for long-term independence from the Rif, arguing for a national right of self-determination.

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However, despite the often acerbic division between these two factions, despite the strong references to collective memory of colonial violence, and despite the often marginalized position of Moroccan migrants in European societies, both factions share a highly positive reference to the European project. One activist residing in Germany even stated that the actual key reason for division and conflict within the Hirak support movement in the diaspora was not so much the question of independence, but whether people had been politically active with associations or political parties in Morocco, or whether they had started to engage as a member of the diaspora in Europe. The latter, he argued, had more integrity and credibility because they were not tainted with “Moroccan politics”, which he described as essentially corrupt and coopted by the *makhzen*. In many interviews, Europe was described as the spatial epitome of dignity, equality and social justice,



and as such compared to the Moroccan regime and the conditions of politics in Morocco. This reference to political freedom in a European country also came up frequently in public statements. At a protest organized by activists from France and Germany in Frankfurt am Main, in February 2018, on the occasion of the visit of the Moroccan diaspora minister, many speeches explicitly contrasted the political realities of Europe and Morocco. Only here he had learned how institutions can function under the rule of law, one of the speakers emphasized. Another speaker addressed the *makhzen* and shouted: “We live here now, you can’t hurt us!”

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Such an imaginary of Europe, i.e. the activists’ “European Mental Space” (Schütze and Schröder-Wildhagen, 2014), is of particular interest in a time of an existential crisis of the European project and the rise of right-wing populism and EU-scepticism. Some of the activists have family members in other European countries who they have been visiting on a regular basis. Now, in the framework of their activism, they travel across Europe even more frequently in order to meet with other Hiraq supporters for protests, discussion and coordination. Within the transnational diasporic networks they thus create, they exchange experiences of migration to the respective countries, and learn about the living conditions and the culture there, as well as about the conditions of the Rifian diaspora.

Abdul (32 years old), an activist in Madrid, reflected upon the issue as follows: “When we talk about the Mediterranean, we usually identify it with Europe. We don’t understand Europe as a geographical area, but as a space of ideas, enlightenment, development and

progress with the aim of assimilating it, as an example to follow [...]. That’s why the Mediterranean is defended, because it has a component of tolerance. And the people of the Rif, if we want to make progress, have to feed off tolerance. A social movement without these principles, tolerance, democracy, pacifism, cannot go far [...]. That’s why we defend this space, because the Rif is part of North Africa. North Africa is a place of meeting of centuries-old civilizations and, when we stand up for our memory, we do not only mean the part related to the Republic of the Rif but, also, the centuries-old memory of the Mediterranean.”

That political imaginary comes, of course, with very concrete criticisms. Abdul stressed: “Europe still owes a historical debt to the Rif and the best way of making it good is to invest in strengthening democracy and local development. The Hiraq is offering this opportunity to Europe and to Morocco, simply demanding that the Moroccan regime complies with the international agreements signed on this issue.”

While many interviewees emphasize that in Europe they feel much more at ease with the exercise of Amazigh and Rifian culture, they likewise understand their engagement as genuinely European, in fact, as an exercise of their European citizenship, despite – or precisely because – of their vocal criticism regarding the EU’s cooperation with Morocco. Ibrahim (62) grew up in Meknès, where he had been an activist in leftist student groups within the Union Nationale des Étudiants du Maroc (UNEM). He came to Strasbourg to study in the 1980s, took on French citizenship, and describes himself as a convinced European. He sends his little son to a German school, and learns German with him. In an informal talk, he recounted that every time he receives visitors from Morocco, he takes them to the Jardin des deux Rives, a park on both the French and the German bank of the river Rhine: “We walk over the bridge across the Rhine and, on the other side, I ask



my visitors: ‘Did you notice? We are now in Germany.’ They are usually surprised that we just crossed a border between nation states, just like that. Just imagine, France and Germany had waged war against each other so ferociously over centuries. I think the Maghreb states could learn so much from this, especially Morocco and Algeria.”

On another occasion, I met Ibrahim at a protest in the center of Strasbourg. He told me that just some moments ago he had been approached by a man who seemed annoyed with their protest, and who had provocatively asked why they did not protest “in their own country.” Ibrahim supposed that he was a member of the right-wing Rassemblement National. “I responded: ‘This is my own country. I am French now, and I am protesting because, as a French citizen, I am outraged by the human rights violations that take place on the other side of the Mediterranean.’”

Strasbourg and Brussels are hotspots of Hirak support mobilizations because Hirak solidarity committees have mobilized protest rallies not only in front of Moroccan embassies and consulates throughout Europe but also in front of the European institutions. The EU is Morocco’s most important trading partner, accounting for almost 60% of its trade in 2017, with both sides currently negotiating a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). At the European Parliament, the activists have gained the support of several MEPs, among them Kati Piri, member of the Dutch labour party and of the EU Committee on Foreign Affairs. “In the Netherlands, we have a community of about 400,000 Dutch Moroccans, of which the vast majority come from the Rif,” Piri stated in an interview in Strasbourg in May 2018. Members of her party who have their origins in the region approached her about the human rights situation there. In April that year, Piri and the former Dutch Minister of Development, Lilianne Ploumen,

visited Morocco, specifically to learn about the situation in the Rif, also with regard to their constituency in the Netherlands, as Piri emphasizes. They first attended the trial of Nasser Zafzafi in Casablanca, and met the team of the prisoners’ lawyers, who informed them of the irregular procedures in the trial. Then, Moroccan authorities would not allow them to continue their trip to Al Hoceima, as they had announced it. Piri wants the European Parliament to take a clear position and address the situation of the Hirak detainees as political prisoners and put the human rights situation in Morocco at the top of its agenda.

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On several occasions, Piri and other MEPs invited Zafzafi’s parents who spoke at a meeting at the European Parliament in Strasbourg and reported on the situation of the prisoners. In addition, Hirak supporters have, with relative success, campaigned for a nomination of Nasser Zafzafi for the Sakharov Prize of the European Parliament, where he achieved second place. Recently, activists managed to get the MEPs that are sympathetic to the Hirak’s cause and show solidarity with its prisoners to form their own parliamentary group, the Friends of the Rif. Currently, activists and MEPs are mobilizing for a nomination of Zafzafi for the Vaclav Havel-Prize of the European Council. These new networks and their dynamic interplay between diaspora activists, European representatives, and the protests on the ground in Morocco could be of importance in determining to what extent current and future protests will bring about change in the country.

Conclusion

In times of an existential crisis of the European Union, epitomized by Brexit and an upsurge in mostly right-wing EU-skepticism, the Hirak support activists offer an interesting case of a transnational European citizenship – a citizenship they are actively adopting, exercising and shaping, and which to them does not contradict their identity as Irifiyen and/or Moroccans. As such, they do not actually form part of a global Moroccan diaspora, irrespective of the context of country of arrival, as outlined by Dumont (2016), but their orientations and identifications are, in most cases, on the one hand anchored in the Rif and its history, and, on the other, in their imaginary of the EU and the European project, and their strategic access to European institutions.

In times of an existential crisis of the European Union, epitomized by Brexit and an upsurge in mostly right-wing EU-skepticism, the Hirak support activists offer an interesting case of a transnational European citizenship

It is precisely the experience of migration from an authoritarian-ruled country of origin, and of being part of a diaspora that fosters this identification with Europe, and the task to struggle not only for the acknowledgment of the Hirak movements' demands and the release of its prisoners but also the acknowledgment of the Rif's history. Their biographies thus illustrate the dynamic overlays of various identifications, acquired in different spatial and political contexts, and through the appropriation of a broad spectrum of historical memories that contradict concepts of political socialization and citizenship within the framework of a conventional nation state.

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