

Moroccan American Studies: Assets and Challenges⁽¹⁾

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Abstract

This article provides both Moroccan and foreign scholars interested in Moroccan American studies with an explicit account of the state of this field of research in the Moroccan university. The article traces the evolution of this dynamic field and describes the Moroccan context in which it is implemented. The focus is on the objectives, the assets, the content, and the challenges facing the implementation of this academic program in Morocco.

Introduction

The recent unprecedented interest in American studies from different perspectives and in different regions of the world has considerably widened the scope of the subject to the extent that it has acquired a multidisciplinary status. The influence of globalization and the increasing desire to understand America have also oriented the field to this end. From the tradition set up by Vernon Louis Parrington (1927), who is referred to as the founder of American studies, until the current development in the field, tremendous and varied work has been accomplished. This situation has incited researchers like Pease and Wiegman

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2004 Cairo conference.

(2002) to invite scholars to stop and reflect on the history and the achievements of the American studies so far to determine the possible approaches to better comprehend America in the present millennium.

The Cairo Conference

More than six years have passed since the inaugural American Studies Regional Conference held in Cairo in 2004, the event that has officially launched discussion between the Arab and the American scholars on developing American studies at Arab universities. The interest in this academic discipline has come at a critical time characterized by cultural and political tensions between the Arab World and the United States. This situation has led to a growing conviction from both sides that there is an urgent need more than ever before to know "the other" better and to build feelings of trust and cooperation between the Americans and the Arabs. Relevant themes related to American studies both as a discipline and as an area of regional studies have been identified and objectives have been set up, and these include providing support for the existing resources, encouraging research and developing exchange networks (the proceedings of the conference are reported in Wise and Soliman 2004).

Among the recommendations that both the Arab and the American participants in this conference repeatedly stressed was the necessity to create a strong Arab Association of American Studies with the aim of bringing together on a regular basis Arab and American researchers to engage in a serious academic dialogue. This association was also supposed to institutionalize, monitor, and evaluate American studies programs in Arab universities and to facilitate networking and exchange among the Arab scholars interested in this field of inquiry. Alas, since the Cairo Conference very little has been achieved.

The National Context

The implementation of a Moroccan American Studies Program in Hassan II Mohammedia/Casablanca University has come at a transitional phase in the history of Morocco and in a context marked by deep political, social, and economic transformations. In the mid 1990s, Morocco experienced some major political mutations which paved the way to more related changes in the current decade. The late King Hassan II wanted to speed up the process of political reforms. In order to convince the opposition parties to participate in government, he introduced a number of compromises to the newly revised constitution, which was

adopted by referendum in 1996. For the first time, all members of parliament must now be elected by direct universal suffrage and sovereignty belongs to the nation (art. 2). In 2004, the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, a human rights organization, was created by King Mohammed VI in order to reconcile victims of human rights abuses and atrocities committed during the years of oppression conventionally described by Moroccans as the Years of Lead (1960-1990). These major steps were accompanied by a series of reforming laws regulating a number of key sectors, namely national press, political parties, legislative and local elections and the audio-visual scene. The main goal of these laws was to grant more freedom to potential actors in this young democracy.

The big changes that occurred at the international level in the 1990's and the consensus upon achieving the UN Millennium Declaration Goals (MDG) have encouraged Morocco to launch a national initiative for human development that derives its goals from the MDG but takes into consideration the local context. This initiative has made of Morocco's social problems a political priority and has adopted a participatory approach involving non-for-profit organizations and local authorities in both conception and realization of socio-economic projects. But certainly the turning point in Moroccan social life was the adoption of a new family code in February 2004 – a progressive law, which is considered to be a “revolution” and a pioneering initiative in both the Arab and the Muslim Worlds. Moghadam (2008) affirms that it has drawn on international standards and norms on women's and children's rights, and has paid due respect to Islam's spirit of justice and equality (see also Virkama 2009).

The reforms that Morocco has implemented in various economic sectors since the 1980's have accelerated its integration into the world marketplace and have consolidated the international trust in its economy. These reforms have also paved the way for the signature of a Free Trade Agreement with the United State in 2004, and of the advanced partnership status agreement with the European Union in 2008. Meanwhile, Morocco has endorsed a number of trade agreements with other African and Arab countries, providing a ready platform for foreign investment in the local economy. These agreements have certainly strengthened earlier economic achievements and given fresh impetus to the modernization and the democratic transition process that the country is undergoing.

The Reality of the Moroccan American Relations

Although Morocco was often associated in early American history with Barbary Corsairs and North African pirates as it is asserted by Gawalt (2005), the manuscript specialist in Library of Congress, the long history of Moroccan American relations testifies that there has always been a strong friendship between the two nations. It is often stated in official meetings between Moroccan and American officials that Morocco was the first nation to recognize the newly sovereign United States in 1777. The Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the US and Morocco signed in 1787 is the longest standing friendship treaty in US diplomatic history (see Irwin 1970; Hall 1971 and Lambert 2005).

Today, Moroccan American relations continue with an extended cooperation in various domains, namely in the political, the economic and the socio-cultural fields. The political interests of the two nations often converge in a number of issues. Morocco is a strong American ally in countering terrorism and extremism in North Africa and it has always supported the American policy in Sub-Saharan countries. Although the American administration is often not clear about the conflict in the Moroccan southern territories, the autonomy plan presented by Morocco to the UN Security Council in April 2007 received the support of the US government and the endorsement of 173 members of US congress. Both countries endeavor to establish a just and lasting peace in the Middle East, though Morocco, like the other Arab nations, does not approve of the unconditional American support to Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians.

At the economic level, Morocco, an emerging market at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, was the second Arab country after Jordan to negotiate a free trade agreement with the US government in 2004. This agreement is another step in the American strategy to make the Middle East a free trade zone. Moroccan officials consider this achievement to be a significant encouragement from the United States to the economic and political reforms initiated by the Kingdom. It has, indeed, considerably increased economic exchange between the two countries and has opened up new opportunities for companies from both sides.

During the long history of their friendship, Morocco and the United States have accumulated a rich legal heritage, over a hundred official agreements, which has allowed American international cooperation agencies like the USAID and the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) to build exchange programs with Moroccan governmental and non-governmental organizations working in

social, educational, health and cultural sectors. These developing ties with the United States are real incentives and strong assets for the future of the Moroccan American Studies Program in Hassan II Mohammedia/Casablanca University; they prove that both training and research in this area of inquiry are promising.

It is worth stressing here, however, that by providing political support to Moroccan reforms and by increasing cooperation programs with Morocco, which is presented as a tolerant, moderate and open society, the American government and the American press portray Morocco as a model for Middle-East countries. This policy also sends strong signals about the commitment of the American government to liberalize trade and encourage reforms and democratization in this region of the world (see Ottaway and Reilly 2006 and Manyani 2009).

The Objectives

The general objective behind the implementation of Moroccan American Studies Program in Hassan II Mohammedia/Casablanca University is to encourage academic research in this field of inquiry and to contribute to the development of better understanding between the Moroccan and the American peoples. Strum (2004) points out that it is unwise in the age of globalization, the Internet and international stock exchanges not to teach our students about the world's only superpower. This does not always mean that the world has to follow blindly what is happening in America. Quite often anything new happens first in the US and then the world follows. Sometimes it is insightful to understand America to avoid the inadequate policies that America has experienced. Being a pioneer in accomplishing a work may offer the others lessons for better future (Kantor 2005).

The educational objective of this program is to offer an opportunity for Moroccan students to understand both Moroccan and American histories, cultures and societies and to explore Moroccan-American relations with the goal of improving mutual cultural understanding and respect. The program also aims at introducing students to fundamental theoretical concepts and research skills to help them carry on research projects according to the needs of the country. The students are acquainted with analytical and independent creative and critical thinking skills necessary to cope with the challenges of the modern world.

This program invites Moroccan scholars to develop their own readings of America and to be attentive to the political, social and economic developments of the world's only superpower (cf. Dajani 2004). It also opens new pathways of

dialogue and communication for Moroccan researchers to present to their American counterparts and to the rest of the world an objective reading of their own culture and the mutations Moroccan society is undergoing these days. Hopefully, such initiative will qualify a number of stereotypes, misconceptions and prejudices about "the Other" and will contribute to the promotion of the culture of peace, tolerance and inter-cultural respect.

The Challenges

Unfortunately, limited research facilities, insufficiency of resources and the reluctance of institutional structures of support are real hindrances to the development of the Moroccan American Studies Program in Hassan II Mohammedia/Casablanca University, a situation that is not uncommon in a good number of universities in the Arab World and elsewhere. However, these problems only constitute the visible part of the iceberg and are relatively less important than the political, the philosophical, the pedagogical, and the cultural challenges that call into question the quality of the training.

The first real challenge is to be attentive to Edward Said's warning not to make of such program an "Occidentalist" program, a disguised channel marketing the interests of US foreign policy, or an "Anti-American Studies program", stressing only what is negative in America (Said 1997; see also Wise 2004). Is it then still relevant to question the legitimacy of the skepticism about exactly whose interests such programs serve? Or is it perhaps wiser to take a more practical stance and focalize on how this program serves Moroccan and American interests by subsuming the notion of opposition inherent in the process of "othering" under a more inclusive approach that would seek through the study of cultural diversity, to pinpoint recurrent universal patterns? Raising such questions shows the difficulty of defining the fuzzy boundaries of this program and the gradual transition from one extreme to another.

The second challenge is pedagogical and in some measure philosophical too. It is related to the ultimate goal of this program, which is to consolidate students' skills as critical readers of Moroccan and American cultures. These skills allow them to play the vital role of "professional mediators" between American and Moroccan socio-cultural contexts. Wise (2004) believes that these students should "think of themselves not as "native informants" in Said's terminology, but as cultural "translators," who are firmly grounded in their own cherished traditions but also comfortable in wider contexts of engagement". As

a natural outcome of a student's participation in the Moroccan American Studies Program,

he or she becomes "the one who knows" and can authoritatively speak about the United States to...[Moroccans] or about [Moroccan] culture to Americans. Either way, the [Moroccan] American Studies student is cast in the role of "expert," the one who has the right to represent. But on what basis does our students' authority reside? (Wise 2004, emphasis mine).

To answer this question Wise (2004) advises the educators to be patient listeners, to confront students with the right questions and to help them acquire the necessary skills to "create accurate and powerful representations of themselves, not simply on the basis of who they are, but on the basis of what they know, from the knowledge they gain in such programs." Students have to learn to be conscious of the heavy responsibility they have as cultural "translators," and they have to develop "healthy skepticism" to avoid parroting the preconceived ideas and stereotypes that are behind the misunderstandings which block channels of communications between cultures.

The Status of the Program

The study of America in Morocco has always been inadequate and fragmented. American Studies as a discipline has never been granted an independent status in the Moroccan university. American social, cultural, political and economic issues have been taught in different departments only marginally and sporadically: US political system is taught in law departments; American economic foundations are taught in economics departments and business schools; American literature and culture are taught in the departments of English studies; American history is taught in history departments and so on. In this context, Moroccan American studies can only be defined as an area of study, not as an independent discipline, and for the time being it is hosted in Hassan II Mohammed/Casablanca University, Faculty of Letters and Humanities in Ben Msik, Department of the English Language and Literature. This has been a practical decision to overcome the legal problem and surmount the lack of human and financial resources. The implementation of this original program in Morocco has been possible only within the new educational reform the Moroccan universities have embarked on since 2003. Although the program has received accredita-

tion from the higher educational authorities of the country, the pedagogical team which supervises it is still in dire need of institutional support and of official recognition for the pragmatic values of developing such a program in Morocco. More support from governmental and non-governmental American organizations is needed to contribute to its sustainability and to its natural development.

Program Content

The pedagogical team responsible for Moroccan American Studies Program in Hassan II Mohammedia/Casablanca University has set up three main principles to design the syllabus, taking into consideration the objectives and the challenges facing the program. The first principle revolves around fostering students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills to help them develop their metacognitive abilities. The second principle concerns students' active involvement in learning; which cannot be achieved without being attentive to their developmental needs. The third principle stipulates that the courses should be assignment-oriented rather than lecture-based to promote active, purposeful, effective learning using a high-tech educational approach.

This program has allowed for the accommodation of several disciplines necessary to understand the multi-faceted nature of Moroccan and American cultures and societies. In this respect, a number of courses have been designed. They include "History and Development of Arabic and American English"; "Survey of Arabic and American Linguistics"; "Cultural History of Moroccan-American Relations"; "Critical Approaches to Literature"; "Introduction to Moroccan Literature"; "Moroccan and American Popular Cultures"; "Arts Workshops"; "New Media Studies"; "Research Methodology and Writing"; "The Linguistic Situation in Morocco and in the US"; "Text Linguistics"; "Survey of Modern American Literature"; "Issues in Contemporary Moroccan Literature"; "Production and Reception in Moroccan Media"; "Aspects of American Media"; "Culture-based Translation"; "Language Variation and Change in Morocco and in the US"; "Language Policies in Morocco and in the US"; "The Theory and History of Travel"; "American Travellers in the Maghreb"; "The Maghreb In the American Cinema"; "Issues in Moroccan American Politics"; "Religion and Ethnicity Issues"; "Work skills"; "Research Orientation" and a seminar on "Moroccan American Issues."

This "comparative cultural pedagogy" has had a very positive effect on the students; contrary to the reactions reported by some Arab colleagues from other

Arab universities in the Cairo Conference (see Wise and Soliman 2004). The faculty in Hassan II Mohammedia/Casablanca University, share Wise's view that

comparative approaches are essential, that cultural comparison is indeed a fundamental condition of human understanding; you may also agree that it is inevitable that our students will want to explore similarities and differences between Arab and American society. (Wise 2004)

However, they remain very much concerned with the effective implementation of this comparative cultural pedagogy. That is why there is a strong interest in encouraging students to be independent learners and to develop their critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills and cope with the responsibilities and challenges facing them once they leave the institution. There is a growing awareness among faculty that this comparative cultural pedagogy can succeed only if it is implemented in a spirit of reciprocity (Moroccan/American), away from any intimidation.

Future Prospects

There are three main issues which dominate the thinking of the pedagogical team for near-future prospects. The first concerns the adoption of a monitoring and evaluation model which takes into consideration the local context. The faculty are strongly convinced that developing such a model is an essential concomitant of improvement and accountability for this program. The Context Input Process Product (CIPP) Model (Stufflebeam 2003), used throughout the United States and around the world in short-term and long-term investigations, seems to be useful to our context. The model is based on four aspects:

Context evaluations determine what needs are addressed by a program and what program already exists helps in defining objectives for the program. Input evaluation determines what resources are available, what alternative strategies for the program should be considered, and what plan seems to have the best potential for meeting needs facilitates design of program procedures. Process evaluation assesses the implementation of plans to help staff carry out activities and later help the broad group of users judge pro-

gram performance and interpret outcomes. Product evaluations identify and assess outcomes (intended and unintended), short term and long term to help staff keep an enterprise focused on achieving important outcomes and ultimately to help the broader group of users gauge the effort's success in meeting target needs (McLemore 2009).

The objective of this evaluation system is to collect information about the context, the input, the process and the outcome of the program and use it to improve the effectiveness of the program and make alternative decisions where needed (Stufflebeam 2003).

The second concern is to organize and structure academic research on Moroccan American studies to meet the pedagogic objectives discussed above and improve research productivity (articles, books, websites, and academic journals on relevant Moroccan American issues). This undertaking requires setting up priorities, establishing a regular research program (seminars, conferences, colloquia, workshops; academic publications) and looking for the necessary funding to finance the proposed research projects from both the public and the private sectors. The third concern is related to the second and it is about the strong need to create a network of Moroccan, Arab, and international experts interested in Moroccan American studies. This structure will allow scholars to exchange research findings and learn about the new experimental pedagogical approaches. It will be extremely difficult to implement monitoring and evaluation parameters without the establishment of such an association.

Concluding Comments

There is no denying that Moroccan American Studies Program is still in an experimental phase, but there are good reasons to believe in its sustainability and success. These assets include: the democratic transition that Morocco is undergoing today, the strengthening of the Moroccan American ties in various domains, the increasing interest among Moroccan scholars from different disciplines in America, the educational reform that Moroccan universities have experienced since 2003, and the growing demands of American universities to develop academic exchange programs with Moroccan and Arab universities, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States.

To maintain a reasonable degree of credibility, the pedagogical team perceives the Moroccan American Studies Program as an independent and serious academic endeavor that has no political agenda. Its main objectives are to train a new generation of researchers capable of consolidating the existing cultural dialogue between Morocco and the United States. They are also expected to develop their own readings and interpretations of America and present an objective portrait of their culture and the changes Moroccan society is undergoing beyond any spurious patriotism. This program is an academic innovation both in terms of goals and impacts. It is an engaging field which offers great opportunities for students and opens up new horizons for academic research.

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