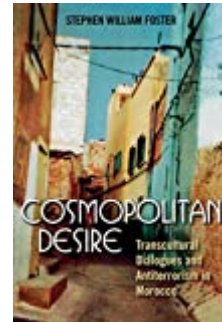


Stephen William Foster. *Cosmopolitan Desire: Transcultural Dialogues and Antiracism in Morocco*. Lanham: Altamira Press, 2006. 248 pp. \$31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7591-1024-3.



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Toward an Ethics of Difference Via a Symbolic Tour of Contemporary Morocco

This book is by no means a work of history, even though its author, Stephen William Foster, evokes the contemporary history of Morocco from the 1970s to the months immediately following the accession of King Mohammed VI to the Moroccan throne, with flashbacks to the colonial and precolonial periods. It is structured as a travel journal describing places and people, but its extensive scholarly commentary and anecdotal approach, reflecting its author's training as an anthropologist, pushes it in the direction of works like Laurence Wylie's study of French rural life, *Village in the Vaucluse* (3rd ed., 1974), and Colin Turnbull's study of the Ik of Northeastern Uganda, *The Mountain People* (1972), in which pithy anecdotes are structured and presented to reveal perceived anthropological and sociological realities.

The complexity of the book is increased because the author seizes the occasion of a long period of exposure to Moroccan society, "largely a male space," to explore, in terms of the Lacanian "Other," his own particular situation as a white middle-class gay male in the United States, a country that has only recently become tolerant

of homosexuality, and how his situation there compares with his situation in Morocco, a country where homosexuality "is condemned and acknowledged by being left unacknowledged" (pp. 8, 18n16). Foster compares his own deviations from the norms of middle-class WASP American society with the efforts and struggles of the Moroccans whose paths he crosses to reconcile their personal self-fashioning with the changing norms of Moroccan society. The situation of these Moroccans, he admits, is more complicated than his own, because they have to adapt to the contradictory demands of postcolonial modernization, adherence to Islamic and Arabic traditions, and the failures of postcolonial Morocco to develop an economy capable of lifting the majority of Moroccans out of poverty. A further distinction that sets this book off from the more usual travel account is that, as Foster acknowledges, the persons he evokes are "ethnographic fictions" and that his approach blurs the distinctions between "description, fiction, and autobiography," one that he believes "reflects the Moroccans' own pastiche style of fashioning themselves" (pp. v, xii).

So, with these caveats and the understanding that the very realistic scenes and people that he describes are not altogether real, Foster guides the reader on a tour of Morocco, particularly of Tangier, where he was based as a house guest, in the 1970s, in the home of a well-to-do Moroccan family (of Algerian origin). He also takes the reader to Casablanca, Meknes, and Fez, as well as on forays into the Moroccan emigre communities of the Barbès-Rochechouart neighborhood of Paris and the San Francisco Bay area. The questions Foster constantly asks are: How do people adapt? How do they deal with difference? How do they fashion themselves particularly in normative situations in Islamic societies, in the uncertain diversity of the United States, and in assimilationist France, that are not conducive—indeed frequently very hostile—to individual fashioning? How do individuals and societies evolve from tolerance (an attitude that, according to Foster, can be very normative and thus very intolerant) to acceptance of difference, the keyword being acceptance? The ideal outcome of the type of quest that the author outlines would be the achievement of cosmopolitanism on a personal as well as collective basis.

But to achieve cosmopolitanism is difficult if not impossible. Ethnocentrism is obviously a barrier. So too is multiculturalism, because, as Foster explains, it tends to reify or essentialize cultures as distinct and unmixable entities (p. 180). It is better, he writes, to strive for cosmopolitanism via a process of self-fashioning as most of the persons presented in the book have attempted to do with greater or lesser success. Possibly, as Foster suggests, an ethics of cosmopolitanism can be fashioned that would have the sagacity to defend experiencing and understanding difference while realizing that difference cannot be known altogether, in its own terms (p. 186); thus the cliché, live and let live. Again, the process and the results are tenuous and possibly fleeting. But, as Foster insists, the alternative to ethical cosmopolitanism would most likely be normalization and, as an extreme reaction, eventual terrorism and genocide.

Foster perceives that the way the Moroccans he has encountered have adapted to change, to postcolonial modernism, to life in foreign countries (emigrant Moroccan workers in France, for instance), offers lessons in incipient cosmopolitanism that have quasi-universal application. The way he was unconditionally accepted in Morocco as a homosexual is the way he would like to be accepted in the United States and anywhere else he might wish to go.

The main problem with this book, at least from the

point of view of the reviewer who happens to be a historian, not an anthropologist or a sociologist, is its aura of unreality so far as representation of the whole of Morocco is concerned. Foster admits that his subjects are semi-fictional—all well and fine. Changes in name and the elision of personages do not necessarily detract from the reality that Foster is attempting to portray. What is more problematic is Foster's concentration on Tangier, the history of which—at least since the mid-nineteenth century—has been quite different from that of the rest of Morocco. It has always had more international exposure than other Moroccan cities and during the period of the French and Spanish protectorates (1921-56) was internationalized. Its long-term Moroccan residents do not reflect *le Maroc profond*.

Such distorted representativity is reflected in Foster's description of Hamid Cherifi, the head of the family in Tangier that first received him. Foster presents Cherifi as being of Algerian origin, modeling him on a number of Algerian notables who were ranking adjuncts to the French conquest of Morocco and whose sons then served the post-1956 independent *Makhzen*. Cherifi and his children, about whom readers learn a great deal, are worldly, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan. But how typical of Morocco, even of the minority of middle-class Moroccans, are they?

Another possible distortion that the author repeatedly acknowledges is that resulting from the disparity of power and wealth between Morocco and the West—in particular the United States. He feels that in the eyes of most of the Moroccans he encounters he is the wealthy American, however much he might wish to escape that label. Are Moroccans, he asks, interested in him simply because he is American and wealthy? Is there a basis for dialogue, for friendship, that might transcend this disparity? The author hopes so but is not certain.

Lurking in the background of Foster's anecdotes and philosophizing is the postcolonial state, the *Makhzen* that reemerged with the resumption of Moroccan independence in 1956. Foster perceives the restored *Makhzen* as an unstable creation however much it was modernized by the French protectorate administration. Even Morocco's traditional mint tea, he claims, was not an indigenous creation but the product of colonial tea and sugar markets (p. xi). In Foster's opinion, the oppressiveness of the French administration laid the basis for the oppressiveness of the postcolonial *Makhzen*, later made even more oppressive by the efficiency derived from modernization, particularly during the period of rule of King

Hassan II (1961-99). The relative opulence of the neo-colonial elite was supported during this period by a tough royal dictatorship which suppressed any political dissent and removed a number of political opponents. And Morocco continues to be afflicted with instability and crisis, high unemployment, rapid-fire urbanization, exorbitant population growth, sluggish industry, and recurrent drought to which Foster could have added the growing threat of Islamic fundamentalism (p. 194).

Despite Foster's harsh view of the dark underside of contemporary Morocco, he ends his book on a somewhat optimistic note. Just as he, inspired by his contacts with Morocco and Moroccans, has been able to propose paths to cosmopolitanism and an ethics of difference, the new Moroccan king, Mohammed VI, seems to be inching toward much needed political and social change. On his accession to the throne in July 1999, for instance, Mohammed VI proclaimed his wish to be a constitutional

monarch. Later, he put the weight of his authority behind a reform of the Family Code that would liberalize the status of women. But still, it seems, the iron hand in the velvet glove remains.

All told, this book probably does not give a particularly accurate portrayal of *le Maroc profond* or of the inhabitants of the country's urban *bidonvilles*. Both are acknowledged but not explored. However, Foster has done a masterful job of illustrating, through anecdotes, the processes and effects of modernization, at least as they affect Tangier and such principal Moroccan cities as Casablanca, Rabat, Meknes, and Fez, and of introducing his readers to the particularities of the Moroccan Diaspora. And by evoking his homosexuality in his pleas in favor of cosmopolitanism and an ethics of difference, Foster successfully blends his scholarly and personal itineraries, carrying them forward to a satisfying destination.

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