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- 1 This collection of essays, according to the editors, “constitue en soi une sorte d'événement. Il y a encore peu d'années un tel synoécisme franco-maghrébin eut été impensable” (p. 1). Indeed, eight of the fifteen authors represented in this conference volume are North African or Middle-Eastern, the other half French. They came together in June 1997, moreover, to take the measure of the eminent sociologist “du monde musulman”, Robert Montagne (1893-1954), whose career and scientific corpus “sont inséparables du fait colonial”. With the hopes and illusions of decolonization well behind us, and the miseries of the postcolonial present raising new questions and new theoretical approaches, the time has come for all concerned to reconsider the production of knowledge under colonialism and the uses to which it was put. On the one hand, academic anthropologists and sociologists in France have long dismissed the scholarly contribution of imperial administrators as simply unworthy of admission to the canon – occluding in this way the problematic relationship of their disciplines to the former empire. On the other, North African intellectuals have been rightly suspicious of scientific texts by authors who openly supported France's modernizing mission overseas. Yet the best of this colonial science still has much to teach us, not least because it was produced

by men and women who spent their lives on the spot, observing the local realities that they were also seeking to change.

- 2 Robert Montagne's work clearly falls into this category: posted as a young colonial official to Morocco under Lyautey after WWI, Montagne was attached to the department of native affairs during the 1920s. There he quickly learned Berber and Arabic and produced his most significant monographs. These included his landmark thesis on the *leffs* of the Haut-Atlas, *Les berbères et le Makhzen dans le Sud du Maroc: Essai sur la transformation politique des Berbères sédentaires*¹ (1930), published in the prestigious series of *L'Année sociologique*. Despite his newly acquired academic credentials, Montagne refused to abandon "le terrain" for the Left Bank, preferring to continue to put his science in the service of empire. From 1930 to 1936 he served as director of the Institut français d'études arabes in Damascus (1930-1936). In 1936 he founded the Centre des hautes études d'administration musulmane in Paris, of which he remained director until his death in 1954, and whose principal purpose was to train French administrators serving in North Africa; he also launched and edited during these years the review *Asie et Afrique*, and his pioneering investigation of proletarianization in Morocco. He was elected to the Collège de France in 1948, and in his final years wrote extensively on the problem of nationalism². A critical re-reading of the stages of Montagne's career and his key Moroccan texts will perhaps open up new possibilities for imagining that nation's past, present and future.
- 3 The volume presents itself as deliberately open-ended; there is no bibliography of Montagne's works, or chronology of his life. The editors and contributing authors make no pretence of presenting a complete portrait of Montagne or comprehensive analysis of all his works. The point is to capture the multiple ambiguities of a brilliant scholar of Magrebi and Middle Eastern society and Christian humanist nevertheless deeply committed to observing "le réel non pour le rendre intelligible mais pour le contrôler et l'infléchir" (Valensi, p. 27). The book is divided into four parts: the first provides elements of his intellectual itinerary, the second analyzes his influential early work, the third considers his political role in the colonial administration of Morocco, and the fourth takes up the question of his intellectual legacy. Many of the essays only look at certain texts written by Montagne, with little attention paid to historical context. If there is a theme that predominates, it is assessing what is still useful in Montagne's oeuvre, what his blindspots were, and in what ways he transcended the very real orientalist prejudices of his eras. All the essays engage critically yet sympathetically with Montagne, although some are more critical than others.
- 4 Lucette Valensi opens the volume with an overview of certain constants that marked his entire oeuvre, to argue two principal points: Montagne never practiced participant observation, but always spoke for the people he was analyzing; and throughout his career, whether discussing Berber or Bedouin "social facts" or nationalism, he always sought to emphasize "l'anachronisme des sociétés qu'il observait" (p. 36). Madawi Al-Rasheed nuances slightly the first of these two claims by focusing on Montagne's innovative use of oral poetry and narratives in North Arabia to understand political developments in the region in the 1930s. "The art of narration among the Bedouins" for Montagne was "a window from which the scholar [could] reflect on the past through the eyes of the Bedouins themselves" (p. 78). In one of two excellent essays that he contributes to this volume, Daniel Rivet echoes Al-Rasheed's point, this time with respect to the intellectual and local influences on Montagne's classic 1920s work on the Berbers: "Sa démarche consiste bien à lire par dessus l'épaule de l'indigène pour comprendre ce

qui se passe dans sa tête et reconstruire à partir de ses catégories, une culture, une histoire.” This predilection to listen to his informants does not free Montagne, of course, from the obsession of the times to think in terms of an Arab-Berber dichotomy, but he more than most is able to “le sublime[r] un peu” (p. 91). Bou Khalfa Khemmache and Alain Mahé agree. Like Valensi, they consider Montagne’s career as a whole, this time from the perspective of his relationship to France’s “Berber” myth; engagement with practical policy matters over the long term, they argue, led Montagne to criticize the creation of separate Arab and Berber communities which this myth authorized. Jocelyne Dakhli takes up the comparative dimension of Montagne’s work—long thought to be a key element—to demonstrate persuasively that Montagne was more interested in proving the specificity of North African history than in developing analogies between Magrebi political institutions European antiquity or feudalism.

- 5 Several other essays focus on Montagne’s political engagement, particularly right before and after Second World War when the map of the Middle East changed, and decolonization loomed. Henrys Laurens shows us a Montagne already concerned in the 1930s with the threat posed by the question of Palestine to the future stability of North Africa. The war years are covered by Mohammed Kenbib, who documents, *pace* Valensi, just how anachronistic Montagne’s recommendations to De Gaulle’s government in Algiers were, in the face of Moroccan’s rapidly growing nationalist movement. Far from understanding the Sultan’s appeal to a modernizing elite, Montagne remained a prisoner of his own classic view of the Mahzen as the epitome of “oriental despotism”. Daniel Rivet’s sophisticated postcolonial rereading of what has traditionally been considered Montagne’s most flawed work, *Révolution au Maroc*, nevertheless reminds us that Montagne in 1953 was as critical of the absolutist colonial state as he was of the precolonial autocracy that the French always protected. Abdellah Hammoudi has the last word, when he appropriately suggests that we continue to deconstruct “le texte montagnien”, whose colonialist traces refuse to go away, and therefore still require an answer.

NOTES

1. Paris, F. Alcan, 1930 ; réédité en 1989 (Casablanca, Éditions Afrique Orient).
2. Montagne, R., *Révolution au Maroc*, Paris, Éditions France-Empire, 1954.