

A PHILOSOPHICAL BANQUET IN THE COUNTRY, STAGED BY DAR AL-MA'MÛN

Ali Benmakhlouf

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Elín Hansdóttir
Mud Brick Spiral, 2012
Site-specific installation
Courtesy of the artist



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An entire village in a public square: teenage boys and girls, women, men, and a lot of children excited to be together. They are waiting for something: someone has come from Rabat to speak about public space, about what they've just achieved by virtue of being gathered together on hay bales and smiling, smiling indefinitely.

They've been assembled for weeks in fact. A woman from Iceland, named Elín, made an installation in the shape of a mud brick labyrinth with built-in mirrors, which doubles as both artwork and play area: a functional artwork.

Preparations are underway. Juan Asis Palao and Ayoub El Mouzaine, librarians at Dar al-Ma'mûn, are keeping busy, checking mics and laying out cushions. Now it's starting. The speaker, a writer and theatre man named Driss Ksikès mills among the children who ask: 'You're from the Makhzen, you're from the Makhzen?' They tell him about the TV they watch. Some support Real Madrid, others support the Barça. This event will be like a soccer game.

The talk begins in Darija. Everyone understands Darija, both those who went to school and those that didn't. The children are distracted, both chatting and listening. The women are focused, the men serious.

The speaker continues: public space is a shared space. It is what gathers us together. It is a place we talk about as though it were a body, a body often confiscated by authorities who forget to reconfigure it for everyone's use. Yes, everyone accepts that an authority is in charge, but all of us hope that the authority in question will make a common, shared entity out of it ... before realising in disappointment that it is seldom the case.

Ayoub, who is moderating, asks pertinent questions about public places: How about the hospital in case of an emergency, how does one get access to treatment? And women – how are they to obtain respect for their rights?

Generous, patient, eager to communicate, sticking as much as possible to clear, simple language, the speaker insists: women have the same rights as men, women and men are complementary. Society as a whole is the organisation of this complementarity, as it gathers its live forces and makes them cooperate and build things together.

It's time for the Q&A session. A woman stands up, determined, and takes a few steps towards one of the microphones: a barrier easily crossed, so intense is her determination. Yes, she has something to say, yes, she will take advantage of this opportunity to say it: 'No, women and men, they are not the same thing', she says with a voice that is metallic without being too sharp, a voice in which emotion is perceptible even as it is contained. She goes on: 'The men, their business is hard'. All of this was said before the trees, facing the speaker and the moderator and with her back to the audience, addressing an abstract interlocutor,



constituted in that very moment as a neutral interlocutor who could be anybody, one whom each and everyone present could interpret – that is specify – as being the addressee of these clear, halting words.

Then it's a waltz of children, laughing somewhat nervously and gently. Yes, they are given an opportunity to speak into a microphone and be heard. They have crossed the barrier to public speech, surprised by the difficulty of speaking in their own name, all of a sudden, in front of everyone. It is possible, and it is difficult. It's an exercise. The speaker, with his warm manner, makes them feel comfortable, asks them questions about their school. They don't know what to answer and utter yeses that are not yeses. Yes, all is well at school, they say. Their words are predictable, suitable, and rather evasive. No, in truth, what they mean to address, and for which they will utter assertive sentences, are matters of vital urgency: 'We need water' says one of them; 'someone to help us', adds another. Then a determined child, not deterred by the microphones: 'We need transportation to get to Sidi Moussa'. All agree with him: 'Yes! Yes!' He laughs, glad to have conveyed the message. He gives clear answers to the speaker's questions: 'No, no authority has heard us on this matter'.

A young woman takes the microphone and sums up the whole meeting. She is from the village, she has a job. Her voice is dignified, her emotions controlled. She says: 'We need to become aware that women have the same rights as men. They don't have to be submissive. I would like to thank Mr. Redha and Mrs Houria for all they are doing for the village'. The children before her had thanked the couple several times.

Once the discussion is over, several young men and women enter the scene carrying couscous and various tagines. People sit down in no predetermined arrangement, jostling, laughing, eating. 'When's the next one?' they all ask.

About the author

Ali Benmakhlouf divides his time between France and Morocco, and is a professor of philosophy at the Université de Paris Est-Créteil. He specialises in Arabic philosophy and the philosophy of logic. He has published books on Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, and Alfred North Whitehead, as well as on Averroes and Al Farabi and, more recently, Montaigne. In recent years he has been very involved with questions of bioethics and is currently a member of the French National Ethics Advisory Committee and President of the Deontological and Ethical Advisory Committee at the IRD (Research Institute for Development). His most recent books, published in French, are *L'identité, une fable philosophique* (Paris, PUF, 2011); *Vous reprendrez bien un peu de philosophie* (Casablanca, DK éditions, 2011); *C'est de l'art* (Casablanca, DK éditions, 2011).