Mohammed Hassan Wazzani and Malek Bennabi: On the fringes of *Maghrebi* nationalism

I’d like to begin by explaining a little why I have written this paper. I am a History Doctoral student and my thesis is on Muslim Intellectuals in Paris throughout the period of decolonisation. That study aims to situate the interaction of key twentieth century intellectual currents with Islamic thought within the socio-political history of a particular intellectual environment. The paper I am presenting today is rather a derivative of my doctoral research. Malek Bennabi and Muhammad Hassan Wazzani are two of the principal case studies in my thesis. Not only did they both study for a time in the French capital but their active engagement with the socio-political networks present in the metropolis proved to have been highly formative.

So naturally I was working to deepen my knowledge of these individuals, in the case of Wazzani by contacting his family in both Fes and Geneva, and in the case of Bennabi seeking accounts from some of his former students. Throughout my research, I came across various expressions of disappointment, disappointment that the ideas propagated by these forward thinking North Africans had been deprived of their full societal potential. I was also struck by the passion which their memory and ideas engendered and not just among their friends and family; And this paradox led me to ask myself: “What is it about these two cases which pushed them out of the mainstream, which deprived them of their national significance? They seemed to have had pretty receptive audiences to their ideas.”

The answer relates by and large to the obstacles which they encountered during their lifetimes due to their critical and non-conformist views. Despite their participation in the *Maghrebi* Nationalist movements, they both suffered worse from government restrictions and censorship after independence than they did during the struggle against colonialism. They were thus marginalised from the national dialogue, ending up historically on the fringes of *maghrebi* nationalism.

So I was struck by the potential significance of these two cases, as the parallels bring into question those conditions and forces which determine the socio-political potency of a
particular intellectual current within a national dialogue. Therefore, I intend on this occasion to explore the cases of Mohammed Hassan Wazzani and Malek Bennabi side by side in order to begin to explain the context and reasons for their exclusion from their respective national dialogues and their subsequent marginalisation from post-independence narratives. I think especially given the current context of the Arab Spring, which is by and large rejecting the heritage of post-colonial systems of governance, there is certainly value in re-evaluating the accelerated processes of nation-state formation within this region and its consequences upon the subsequent national dialogue.

But before we can address these questions, we must begin by introducing these two intellectual figures. I have provided a brief biographical outline in the hand-outs which [should] have been distributed. Here we have the essential information with a pretty extensive, although not fully comprehensive bibliography of their literary outputs. These are intended to familiarise you with these two cases as quickly as possible so that we can begin to discuss their significance.

Now I don’t begin to assert that these two cases are exactly the same. The most notable difference being that they were from different North-African countries, which were governed by the French very differently. Furthermore, their careers followed very different trajectories, so their contributions to their respective public dialogue have to be evaluated within their own individual capacities.

Firstly, Wazzani was a much more politically prominent figure in the Moroccan nationalist movement than Malek Bennabi ever was with the Algerian War for Independence, which inevitably affected their place within popular memory. Secondly, Malek Bennabi was much more of an “intellectual” in his endeavours than Wazzani. Referred to generally as a “nationalist thinker” rather than a nationalist actor, he was much more polemical in his approach, operating primarily through academic channels, publishing monographs, attending conferences and establishing intellectual seminars across the Near East.
Wazzani on the other hand straddled the line between the intellectual and the political. Although his political movement represented a strong intellectual current in Morocco, he operated almost exclusively within the framework of the press and party politics. Therefore Malek Bennabi and Mohammed Hassan Wazzani operated in different frameworks or spheres of influence, shall we say. So when evaluating the processes of their exclusion from their respective national dialogues, I will evaluate the degree to which they were able to operate freely and to their full potential within their respective zones of influence.

So having established the framework of analysis, we can now explore the processes of exclusion. In the case of Bennabi, this relates to the fact that he could not contribute freely to the development of Algerian intellectual culture and national pedagogy as the dissemination of his ideas was restricted, driven to operate at a semi-clandestine level. The publication of many of his books, especially those which related more directly to the Algerian case, was prevented by the Algerian authorities. This resulted in his publishing and teaching abroad¹, explaining to a certain extent why his work is discussed more outside of Algeria than within.

Bennabi was also kept out of the formal institutional framework. Although he was appointed Director of Higher Education in 1964, this appointment was a political manoeuvre and was never intended as a platform from which to propagate his ideas. He was also outside of Alger University’s formal framework, running instead informal seminars from his house in Alger, and even these initiatives were eventually targeted. In an interview with one of Bennabi’s students, Mustafa Brahimi, I discovered that pupils would take it in turns to guard Bennabi’s house as he was sleeping whenever the intellectual was threatened by assassination attempts².

In the case of Wazzani, his fractious relations with other prominent Moroccan nationalists began very early on. In his memoires, Wazzani describes numerous

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¹ Sadek Sellam, « Le FLN vu par l’écrivain Malek Benabi (1905-1973) – les relations malaisées d’un penseur non-conformiste avec le pouvoir algérien naissant,», Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains, pp. 133-134

² Interview with Mostafa Brahimi, Geneva, Wed 6th July 2011
disagreements he had had with the remainder of the Comité d’Action Marocaine regarding what kind of action was to be taken. He also notes how his primary role in establishing early nationalist initiatives, such as the advocacy organ, Maghreb, was marginalised upon independence by fellow nationalists who sought to take the lion’s share of the credit. Although within these memoirs Wazzani refrains from denouncing individuals explicitly, great-grandson of Karl Marx Robert-Jean Longuet who was himself council member of the journal does corroborate Wazzani’s account of this initiative.³. Thus, it seemed that the prominence of Wazzani’s early contributions to Moroccan nationalism was being marginalised from the start.

Upon independence, Wazzani’s movement became the target of severe repression. Abductions, assassinations and tortures were said to have been rife in the post-independence era, referred to retrospectively as the Years of Lead. Many members of the PDI were targeted and, according to his daughter Houria, Wazzani was forced to employ a body guard. Information regarding these events, as well as the Sultan’s seemingly deliberate neglect to bring these atrocities to justice, have for many years been swept under the carpet until Morocco’s recent Truth and Reconciliation Agreement in 2003. Nevertheless, details concerning these abductions can be found in the PDI’s French language organ, la Democracie, together with Hadj Ahmed Maaninou’s accounts, entitled “Dar Bricha”⁴ published in 1987.⁵ Inevitably, these events significantly impeded Wazzani’s democratic movement in Morocco.

In addition to the restriction and repression of their activities, the place of these two North Africans within public memory was also altered. As we have already seen in the case of Bennabi, the authorities tried to placate alternative forces by granting nominal positions of authority. Wazzani, in much the same way, was offered a conciliatory role in government as Minister of State in 1961, provided that he didn’t seek to alter or reform Morocco’s systems of governance⁶. Wazzani, inevitably dissatisfied with this arrangement, resigned

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³ Ibid., p. 54
⁴ “Dar Bricha ou l’histoire d’un kidnappé” and “Les tortures politiques ou « Dar Bricha » II”
⁵ http://www.hadjahmedmaaninou.com/maaninou_007.htm#oeuvrec2, 10/10/2011 ; (Dar Bricha being the secret detention centre in Tetouan where routine torturing of the govt’s opposition took place in the first years of independence)
⁶ http://www.maroc.ma/PortailInst/Fr/MenuGauche/Institutions/Gouvernement/Historique+des+gouvernements 20/10/2011
almost instantly. The fact that it took the government over a year to publically acknowledge his resignation only serves to reassert that these manoeuvres were aimed to bring dissenting voices under their wing.

Evaluating or assessing the impact of these restrictions upon the fluency of their ideas in the public domain is tricky. There is no doubt that these obstacles impeded their public status but, the discrepancies between these two cases mean that their role within popular memory would have differed vastly regardless of any state intervention. Especially in the case of Bennabi, it is very hard to make counter-factual speculations about the potential status of this intellectual across Algerian society, given his role as an independent scholar.

Accounts from his former students and friends indicate to some extent the strength and potency of his ideas, even though their dedication to this nationalist thinker may be exaggerated. There is evidence that the misrepresentation of his ideas could have also affected its reception in the Algerian national context. In his preface to the re-edition of Conditions de la Renaissance, Abdelkader Djeghloul states that Bennabi’s ideas had been “copiously betrayed and misrepresented”⁷, being associated, as well as his followers, with Islamism, which is indeed a gross misrepresentation. So although we cannot assess precisely the original currency of Bennabi’s ideas within Algeria, there is little doubt that, uninhibited, Algeria might have appropriated Bennabi to a greater degree within its cultural and intellectual heritage.

For Wazzani, this issue is rather more complicated. The political prominence of Wazzani in the early Moroccan independence movement made it hard for the Government to completely eradicate him from the official narrative. According to his daughter, Houria, Wazzani was greeted by the Sultan upon his return to Morocco with the utmost respect and reverence and I did find a Sharia Muhammad Bel Hassan Wazzani in Fes, just off Avenue Muhammad V. However, this memory was contained to that of a national hero, and he certainly was not accredited as a valid political theorist. They completely disregarded, even condescended the intellectual currents propagated by the PDI. For instance, at the official

⁷ Bennabi, Condition., “copieusement trahis, dénaturés [...]”, p. 6
commemoration of Mohammed Hassan Wazzani’s passing, forty days after his death, Abderrahim Bouabid, along with Abdelkrim Ghallab, a representative of the Istiqlal Party, both made strains to emphasise that Wazzani was a national hero, despite his “misguided” ideas about modern governance\(^8\).

So instead of fighting his reputation as a nationalist actor, they seem to have focused their efforts on discrediting the political movement and intellectual current he represented. Having said all of this, even his reputation as a nationalist hero was affected, being still somewhat muted within the national narrative, compared to those of Allal al-Fassi, Omar Abdel-Jalil, Belafrej or Bouabid. This has thus inevitably affected the history of the nationalist movement as presented in the West, as the likes of Allal al-Fassi are accredited with far more historical recognition than Wazzani. Therefore, ultimately, Wazzni, as well as Bennabi ended up on the fringes of maghrebi nationalism.

Now, the reasons for their exclusion are inevitably complicated and manifold. The dominant presumption is that they were simply victims of state consolidation of authority, as is often said, or simply a result of a lack of receptiveness to their ideas in their national contexts, as proposes historian Alan Christelow with the case of MB. Although not completely irrelevant to this study, these kinds of justifications distract the scholarship from other processes and considerations.

Primarily, Malek Bennabi and Mohammed Hassan Wazzani stood as the political opposition and source of societal and governmental critique. Due to their wider, more universal perspectives, they questioned the rhetoric of fellow nationalists, particularly the monolithic single party form of governance which dominated the Maghreb after independence. Unlike many of their contemporaries, neither Bennabi nor Wazzani considered independence as an end in itself. Rather, they saw it as a crucial, but not final step in creating a powerful and rich country.

In the case of Wazzani, this is very clearly manifested in the party literature:

\(^8\) « était intrépide en associant dans ses revendications la démocratie à l’indépendance », Pamphlet “Fondation Mohamed Hassan Ouazzani”, (Fondation Mohamed Hassan Ouazzani, Fes, 1980), p. 100
“The PDI, as the name suggests, is the Moroccan Democratic Party *par excellence* [...] For us, the struggle for national independence has and will always be inseparable to the struggle for democracy in Morocco within the framework of a liberal and constitutional monarchy.”

For Bennabi, the principal source of friction with Algerian nationalist leaders was his culture of critique, targeting Algerian society, intellectual culture and the ruling elite. In addition to those critiques found in his books, Bennabi began to direct his criticisms to the leaders of the FLN as early on as 1956, writing to them from his residence in Cairo, criticising the way in which they went about the nationalist efforts. In particular Bennabi criticised Algerian nationalist leaders for being a group of “*intellectomane*”, a term he used to signify those educated and yet ignorant Algerians who are motivated purely by self-interest.

This critical stand-point became Bennabi’s intellectual legacy. In the preface to the re-edition of *Condition de la Renaissance*, Abdelkader Djeghloul emphasises Bennabi’s role as a social and political critic within his exaltation of the Algerian thinker:

“[Bennabi] was one of the most fruitful of contemporary Algerian thinkers, the most demanding, the most critical in the noble sense of the word, which signifies to indicate what makes sense for the people and their society, distinguishing the good from bad, unravelling the superfluous from the essential, [...]”

So Bennabi certainly inculcated a culture of critique. He, along with Wazzani, sought to sustain the revolutionary momentum, or *soufflé révolutionnaire* in order to form a strong and effective modern nation-state. So even though the specific content of their ideas differed, they shared a common role within their respective national dialogues, as the
opposition to the ruling elite and as critics of the status quo, both in government and society.

So, having explained and assessed the exclusion of Malek Bennabi and Mohammed Hassan Wazzani, we can now begin to address the significance of these two cases regarding the accelerated process of nation state formation. As I have already stated, the consolidation of authority upon independence has become the default explanation. However, these cases clearly show that their fractious relationships with the main body of the nationalist movement began before independence and before the process of consolidating authority. These two personalities were at odds with their fellow nationalists because of differences in perspectives, differences in approaches to the nationalist movement and different opinions regarding their subsequent forms of governance, and these conflicts were manifested early on.

Another unsatisfactory explanation, at least in Bennabi’s case, is that of Allan Christellow. He identifies Bennabi’s culture of critique as the reason for his marginalisation from the public dialogue, arguing that the sentiment of continual struggle and introspection didn’t fit the national mood of elation, relief and exhaustion after independence. I do to some extent see the validity of this statement as it is not uncommon for countries to be exhausted by revolutionary rhetoric after long and bloody conflicts. However, I do not believe that this is a sufficient conclusion to answer the question of why, Bennabi or Wazzani for that matter, ended up on the fringes of *maghrebi* nationalism. These are not just two examples of North-African thinkers who did not receive the fame or notoriety which they felt they deserved. They received notoriety, but their impact on society was, as we have already established, impeded.

It is for this reason that I believe that, unlike Alan Cristelow’s theory, Bennabi, as well as Wazzani, were manoeuvred away from the mainstream. The predominance in both Algeria and Morocco of single party rhetoric stifled political and intellectual pluralism; and the likes of Bennabi and Wazzani proved to be victims of that. So, alternatively to assuming

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13 Allan Christelow, “An Islamic Humanist in the 20th Century: Malik Bennabi”, *The Maghreb Review*, vol. 17, 1-2, 1992; “[Bennabi] did not find a receptive audience among Algerians, filled with revolutionary hope as they were in the 1950s and 60s”, p. 69
the responsibility of state consolidation, I would like there to be more debate as to the reasons why the single party rhetoric dominated maghrebi nationalism to such an extent, at the expense of alternative perceptions of modern governance.

And there are potential alternative avenues to be investigated. Due to time restraints I cannot even begin to evaluate these examples here today however I would like to put forward some suggestions for further deliberation. For instance, it would be possible to explore the degree to which the lack of an open public dialogue prior to independence is responsible for this dominance of single party rhetoric. As colonial authorities stifled any genuine open debate about self-determination during the development of maghrebi nationalism, it was unlikely that these debates would have then been cradled after independence. More importantly, there were insufficient debates about what exactly an independent Morocco or Algeria would look like in the public domain prior to independence. In particular, I believe the suppression of nationalist press by the colonial authorities had a greater impact on the subsequent processes of nation building than is currently accredited.

Another potential force was the effect of French radical, right-wing currents which dominated the French colons communities, on the resultant preference towards single-party states. Especially throughout the 30s and 40s, French fascism and the rhetoric of Pétain’s National Revolution could have influenced North African formulations of independent nation-states.

It is also possible to investigate the influence of the Second World War and the political debacle running up to this political catastrophe in France upon the dominance of single party rhetoric, inspiring nationalists to consider political pluralism as a sign of weakness and as a potential for continued foreign infiltration.

So, in conclusion, the cases of Muhammad Hassan Wazzani and Malek Bennabi bring to the fore some questions regarding the formation of governments in North Africa upon independence. Some these reflections may be universally relevant to the wider Islamic
context, while some are more specific to North Africa’s engagement with the French colonial authorities. But what is clear is that the scholarship needs to better understand these processes in order to go beyond the current theorisations regarding state consolidation of authority which are, in my mind, too one dimensional.