

Eulogy to Jacques Berque By Pierre Legendre

A few words in honor of Jacques Berque, who was for me and many others a particularly fruitful encounter. If Berque has influenced the orientation of my work in my youth, I was above all sensitive to the way he entered what is called with a vague term : Research. Describing his own approach, he gladly repeated an idea that was probably for him as a maxim: "let the problems come to yourself." I have found there a position of principle, my tendency for the perplexity, at a time when I went to Africa with –playing the role of travel stipend - the lessons learned essentially from lawyers of ancient Rome and of the Middle Ages. Fundamental lessons, however narrow, which led me to wander through disparate knowledge - the economy, for example. But what for?

To nourish such high ambitions a beginner needs to make decisive encounters. I remember a long evening spent with Jacques Berque and Theodore Monod and the doctor-anthropologist Charles Pidoux. This should have been in 1960. It was the time of the upheaval of decolonization, and of the turmoil that was called the humanities. In the small circle that I recall, the issue was not so much policy as zoology and botany, knowledge of the Sahara, languages and African music which concerned the French Institute of Black Africa Dakar (IFAN), there was a question of the long history of the Maghreb since the Romans and Visigoths before the Arab conquest. And much talk about Islam. If I mention this story here this is because it is representative of a certain intellectual atmosphere, familiar to Berque, and which I enjoyed myself, so much was I spurred by the desire to leave the strangleholds.

This scholar was a man of experience. A formula of medieval authors did represent him wonderfully : "Scientific theory is sterile, if the fruit is not picked from the practice." If he had a "multiangulaire" approach (I quote one of his words), if his work has explored such a deep sediment of interspersed Arab societies, the scholar had this wealth not only from the vast erudition of a well-read man and the control of theoretical orientations of his time, but above all from an insatiable curiosity to the phenomena of life. Life itself, and at a cultural scale, the institutional life in its various forms. Administrative practice of Jacques Berque in Morocco, with the attendance of Muslim jurists confronted with innovations introduced by the French law, was the first foundation of a work which already went beyond traditional Orientalism.

Berque has inherited this sense of subtle casuistic from modest practitioners who were his masters in exegesis of the texts and customs, resolving conflicts in the village life case after case. And when I had the privilege to listen to Berque, in his seminar on rural communities or in a private lesson about a problem of Arabic carpets, I felt I heard, not an expert, but the modern descendant of a lineage of interpreters. As well, when someone had, outside the academic field, to seek his help to make way to Reason among the international intrigues, in the Unesco and elsewhere on the field of cooperation with the African continent, this demanding thinker, without illusions and well informed, knew to give young people sensible advice on the tone of casuistic, combining precision on the facts, doubts about the arguments and determination in judgment. For this availability, one should pay

hommage to him here in Nantes, this old city mingled with the great history of relations - ambivalent as it is - between France, Europe and Africa.

Let me now briefly mention how the work of Jacques Berque, seen afterwards in its accomplishment, may inspire comments about the future of free questioning in Western societies, threatened by intellectual suffocation because of the techno-science economy. The thought of Berque took place in the history of interpretations. During the lifetime of its author, this thought was for some time the object of an ephemeral attention that we would call mediatic today. After the publication of the great book "The Arabs from yesterday until tomorrow", it was in Paris a plague of "yesterday until tomorrow", and then it went out of fashion...

Beyond the contributions of Jacques Berque, one thing is important to the knowledge of Islam: how to identify what held up this work, a complex approach combining several disciplines in which he recognized himself (sociology, history, Islamic studies ...). But to tell the truth, his methods of investigator and rigorous theorist did not stick with too strict labels, with hasty classifying. I may say that it has been an example to me : to refuse the automatons to think. Today, this basic position seems more actual than ever. I will draw two lessons out of it for young researchers turned to the task of understanding the new world, which Western doctrines qualify with a cursory term - a globalized world:

First lesson: We are what we are. We are the descendants of what was said and what was done through a transmission that eludes us. Societies as well as individuals are dealing with identity, the genealogy of territories and of communities that follow each other. After the Second World War, the geographic breadth colonized by Christian and then industrial Europe, these breadths facing the cold war between the two blocs, shook the imposed guardianship. The Third World was looking after itself, trying to land in this universe of nations facing each other with hostility, belonging to different blocks armed to the teeth. In this international world, ruthless economic, military and politics rivalries were also the masks of more intimate altercations between human groups, where open opposition is inseparable from the ordinary game of identifications. Thus, we witnessed - in a style totally renewed - at the rerun of the immemorial Theater where what is at stake is the relationship between identity and alterity. Understanding this requires, as Berque said, "deep ploughing", an "ascending analysis", that is an analysis that goes back over time.

In his manner of tackling with Islamic cultures across continents, Berque was a thinker who gave all he's got. Studying "the worsening impact of the West" to Arab societies (I quote his words), it was for him, from his own experience, trying to understand these societies, not by hearsay method, but thanks to these informants toward whom ethnology has so much abused. This without intermediaries, namely from within. This has produced the major work of the author in his maturity, a classic to reread today: "The interior of the Maghreb."

Second lesson: "Against schematism". I remember this formula of Berque, as a warning to researchers. He at least had not waited for the sermons on interdiscipline to expand the scope of its thinking. He was in favour of "the back and forth of exegesis". He took as much interest into literary works or songs as in Arabic carpet or politicians montages, he cared for villager investigations as well as for the work of

theologians of Al Azhar . He was against what he called "the excesses of the cult of being objective" I shared with him "the refusal of any objectivist determinism" because he could not separate the subjective expression and social realities. He himself spoke of "an hermeneutic approach" of the world, that is he was primarily a interpreter, in every sense of the term.

One consequence of this position was the extent of his vision, if I may say a flexible questioning, the constant desire to discover. I remember a letter in which Berque asked me if the expanding Roman law brought by the Byzantine Empire was able to reach the Arabs. I did not know. Upon inquiry, I found that specialized roman historian did not ask this kind of question. This anecdote says a lot about a certain state of mind : with Berque I always had the feeling of preparations, the feeling of being bound for the unexpected. The tribute will be here to provide this words by Jean Giono in "The Horseman on the Roof" : "He was one of these men who are twenty-five years old for fifty years."

Finally, allow me one last word. The "clash of the West" evoked by Jacques Berque for the Arabs is a formula which, today, comes into foreground, precisely because of the unexpected. This blow is now coming back on the Euro-American civilization, now facing the decline of its global domination. If (to quote another word of Berque) "our role is to understand", the emerging turnaround needs everything but objectivist ritournelles, it requires "the profound ploughing," the awareness of the times ahead. Everyone here knows, it is the ambition of Alain Supiot the audacious founder of this pioneer Institute. And it is the honor of the City of Nantes to have engraved the name of the great tutelary orientalist to open the path that leads to this place.

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