

Decidedly Marxist: An Interview with Abraham Serfaty (1992)

Saturday 30 March 2019, by [HAYNS Joe](#), [MOZZACHIODI Roberto](#), [SERFATY Abraham](#) (Date first published: 5 March 1992).

As an eighteen-year old member of the Jeunesses Communistes, the youth wing of the Parti Communiste du Maroc (PCM), Abraham Serfaty was imprisoned first by the Vichy régime in Rabat, 1944; he left for France a year after, to study at the country's pre-eminent engineering school.

Serfaty returned to Morocco in 1949. As a member of the Moroccanized, anti-colonial PCM, Serfaty, along with his sister Evelyn, aroused the attention of authorities by distributing copies of *Hayat al-Sh'ab* (*The Life of the People*), the party's Arabic language paper, sliding issues under entrances and in doorways wherever possible. [1] Serfaty kept up his political activities, and in December 1952 he was expelled by the colonial protectorate for his role in the Casablanca dockers' strike. [2] He returned in 1956 with the country's independence, and found work with the state-owned Office chérifien des phosphates (OCP).

Almost immediately, the independent state showed itself as unable to resolve social antinomies in the popular classes' favor, with the [war against the Rif](#) (1958-59) and - to an even greater extent, for the largely urban communists - the murderous response to the [March 23, 1965 student protests](#) each crucial junctures. As both repression and "anti-colonial" hegemony brought the PCM and post-PCM tendencies closer in-step with the state through the later 1960s, the "left of the left" came into an increasingly oppositional relationship with the régime - and it is Serfaty's view of the proper relationship between revolutionaries and what he would call, in 1972, the "*classe makhzan*" (the urban bourgeoisie and rural landowners, as commanded by the royal state, *al-Makhzan*) that constitutes the first major theme of the interview. [3]

The anti-systemic politics of the later 1960s and early 1970s in Morocco were most enduringly expressed through [Souffles](#) (Breaths; figuratively, "Inspirations"), the cultural and political review founded in 1965 by the cohort surrounding the poet and activist Abdellatif La'abi. *Souffles*'s initial, nationally-focused avant-gardism transformed through the later 1960s into a militant [internationalism](#) - whose dilemmas are the interview's second theme - with numerous essays on Indochina, Palestine and the Arabic-speaking world, African liberation struggles, and global radicalism generally (including an essay by Serfaty himself on the Black Panthers in Algiers - "[Salut aux afro-américains!](#)," paired with a translation of the Panthers' [10-Point Program](#)).

With contradictions sharpening, Serfaty resigned from his job with OCP in 1968, in solidarity with phosphate miners striking in Khourigba, near Casablanca. In August 1970, Serfaty, La'abi and others founded the clandestine Marxist-Leninist group Ilâ al-Amâm (literally, To The Front); [4] correspondingly, *Anfâs*, the Arabophone successor to *Souffles*, "became the de facto mouthpieces for the radical Moroccan left." [5] Less than two years later, in January 1972, the leadership of Ilâ al-Amâm were arrested: despite having been "savagely tortured," Abraham was released following "loud protests by the Union National des étudiants" - tragically though, his sister and comrade Evelyn would die due to her injuries. [6] Living underground in the aftermath, Abraham was sentenced *in absentia* in July 1973. He was arrested for the final time in November 1974.

On politics and faith, Serfaty's [lifelong anti-Zionism](#) was rooted partly in his Jewishness ("*Je né suis pas en exil*," as he wrote on Palestine) and, indeed, the relationship between Judaism and political radicalism that Serfaty embodied has been of particular interest to much of recent writing on him. [7] On Islam, while

Serfaty's biography itself shows that, to paraphrase Aziz al-Azmeh, "Islamism is Not the Arab destiny" (and that the Middle East and North Africa is not simply "Arab"), he was in his own writing clear about role that Islamic belief might played and might play in progressive politics.

[Serfaty](#) was released only in 1991, and immediately exiled to France (before stepping onto French territory, he said "I have two protests to raise!" concerning political prisoners in Morocco). He returned finally to Morocco in 1999, as the current King Mohammed VI assumed rule.

Serfaty died in 2010, in Morocco, and is buried in the Ben M'Sik cemetery, Casablanca.

The following interview was conducted in 1991 by François Salvaing and Myriam Barbera, amidst the fall of the Eastern Bloc, and appears in the 1992 collection [Dans les prisons du roi: écrits de Kenitra sur le Maroc](#).

- Roberto Mozzachiodi and Joe Hayns

The translators would like to dedicate their effort to all political prisoners across the Middle East and North Africa, and particularly to the activists of the Popular Movement of the Rif, currently held in Oukacha prison.

François Salvaing and Myriam Barbera: You continue to affirm yourself Marxist, at a time when many augurs believe they are able to read the death of Marx in the ruins of the systems that claimed his name in Eastern Europe. What has allowed you to remain decidedly Marxist?

Abraham Serfaty: It was in the 1960s that I began to ask myself a number of questions on the paths leading to socialism, and about existing socialism.

At the beginning of the sixties, I realized that, from the point of view of the Moroccan situation, we were at a dead end. The Moroccan Communist Party (*Parti communiste marocain*, PCM) had no strategy whatsoever - and not only did it have no strategy, it showed a total and blind conformity towards the bourgeois parties, most of all the [Istiqlal Party](#) [Independence Party], as well as the monarchy. At the international level, we lived through what has rightly been called the [crisis of the international communist movement](#), and we already wondered whether the Soviet Union had taken, under the leadership of Khrushchev, a path leading down a blind alley.

All this led me to reflect deeply, not only on what the revolution in Morocco might be, but also on what socialism could be across the world. Since that time I've been very closely interested in the Chinese experience. I considered then - I've always considered - that it constitutes an important experience for the third world. It was from the beginning a very different path from that followed by the USSR. But, I went deeper than this, when I re-acquainted myself with the philosophical foundations of Marxism.

FS and MB: In what way?

AS: It was in those years that the first texts of [Althusser](#) appeared in France. I sorted through them immediately: what was important to me in them was his writing on materialist dialectics. In the same period I read other philosophical texts, above all [Jean] Piaget's, Ernst Bloch's, and those of Karel Kosík. The foundation of all these texts was what I call the dynamics of structures: the very opposite of structuralism, but also very different from the classical dynamics used by Marxism, which is, in some way, a linear dynamic. I believe that these texts brought something essential and, moreover, returned to the sources of Marx and Lenin's approach. With the latter, it was to [The Philosophical Notebooks](#) that these individuals turned, not to [Materialism and Empirio-Criticism](#). It is there that I rediscovered the concept, which for me is fundamental, of praxis. I had apprehended it for the first time over the course of a masterful lecture by Laurent Casanova [8] to the Communist students in Paris, in March 1948. The term remained in me, but not conceptualized.

These texts, and the first writings of Gramsci translated into French, allowed me to approach all these

problems. For me, they take for their axes two fundamentally related concepts: praxis, and the dynamics of structures. By thus invigorating myself through a deepened understanding of Marxism, I gradually freed myself from all models, first of all from that of the Soviet Union, in a trajectory that lasted seven years.

FS and MB: Did you share this evolution with others?

AS: It was a personal trajectory. In Morocco, total darkness reigned, and in the PCM there were hardly any comrades who asked themselves these questions. In the Moroccan revolutionary movement it was the same, with the sole exception - his name must be repeated - of Mehdi Ben Barka. But, he lived abroad.

In fact there was only one comrade with whom I was discussing, if not theoretical problems, then at least immediate political problems, because he was aware that something had to be done: Hadi Messouak.

FS and MB: Did you not correspond with other Marxists, from other countries?

AS: No, because I did not know any. And then, let us not forget, we were going through a period of retreat, especially after October 1965 and the assassination of Mehdi Ben Barka. The political perspective in Morocco was entirely non-existent.

I read. My research did not lead to an immediate practice, but fueled a deep reflection. I worked on the history of science - I tried to work on the problems of creativity, for example, which related to my profession.

FS and MB: Did you publish at the time?

AS: Yes, in 1968, a text entitled "Culture and Scientific Progress" which crystallized some reflections. In particular, I came to the conclusion that all men can be creators, and that communism will be a society of creators, or it will not be at all - an idea of Marx, by the way. In 1968, through this approach, I came to question the technocratic-developmental conceptualization of human beings' creative potential.

I recall the impact on my trajectory, in the late sixties, of the Six-Day War, on the one hand, and on the other by the phosphate miners' strike. I am convinced that what anchored me, despite the mist and the drifting of those dark years, is that I had known intimately the working masses of Morocco. I knew that, one day or other, revolutionary potential would re-emerge from these masses themselves. How exactly? That, I didn't know.

FS and MB: If that period was enough to shake you, is the one we are living in twenty or-so years later not even more likely to inspire doubts?

AS: How did I restore myself? - it was my encounter with the research of the young intellectuals of the journal *Souffles*, led by Abdellatif La'abi, and on the basis of journal's independence, our founding of *Ilā al-Amām*. All this helped us avoid feeling as if the world was ending, as we witnessed what was happening in the socialist countries.

FS and MB: For you, their failure was not the failure of socialism itself?

AS: Let us be clear: the society that was built in the Soviet Union was a caricature of socialism. I am not talking about the first years, marked by the civil war and superhuman efforts that finally led to the stalemate that has been called Stalinism. I continue to hold that the October Revolution was a major event in the history of humanity.

Precisely because it was a pioneer - there had previously been the Paris Commune, but its existence was too brief - it undermined the structures of world capitalism, and thus opened the door to allow other revolutions - especially the Chinese revolution, as Mao said clearly, but also the Cuban revolution - to conceive of and then to advance along the path of socialism.

On the other hand, the socialism of the countries of Eastern Europe was, since it had been implanted, imported and bureaucratic; since it followed a bureaucratic model, it could not succeed. The Czech part of Czechoslovakia, which had a very strong working class and had a powerful Communist party, could, if it had followed its own path, have built socialism. It was underway before the 1948 coup and was reborn in 1968, but was blocked in both cases. The coup of August 1968 completely destroyed the extraordinary potential that existed at the time. Understandably, the people of Czechoslovakia today no longer have confidence in socialism.

In other countries, it represented an artificial implantation, so its failure was predictable. The case of Yugoslavia was quite different. Very important experiments have been attempted, but unfortunately, everything is floundering on the major question of nationalism.

A word again on the Soviet Union. Of course I wished it could remedy its socialism, and held out that it would during the first three years of Perestroika. In the end, this proved impossible, and the failure was total. However, I am confident that the workers - the working class of Russia and of Ukraine - who have the experience of a century of struggle as the working class, will be able, each and every one in their respective country, return to the path of socialism and make it triumph in these countries.

FS and MB: You said you were very interested in the Chinese experience?

AS: Yes. My point of view, in light of the studies I have read on the subject - and the most serious ones seem to me to be in English - is that in the Chinese countryside, socialism is taking root. It is an extraordinary phenomenon that this advance is taking place in a country where the working class is very weak. It could only be realized on the basis of the ideas of Mao Zedong, which must be assessed above all on their own strengths. For all the third world, there is here matter for reflection.

FS and MB: Did the events of June 1989, especially those of Tiananmen Square, change your point of view?

AS: What happened there - and of course, I condemn what happened - encouraged me to plunge back into the study of what has been going on there since 1949. Because the event cannot be analysed in an isolated way, it is necessary to situate it in the historical frame. And I consider that the only book in France to have objectively done this is [*La Tragédie chinoise*](#), unfortunately written by the right-winger, Alain Peyrefitte.

My conclusion remains unchanged - that socialism in China continues to be built, in one way or another, in an original way, devoid of any previous model. That is, if we do indeed believe that socialism, as a transitional phase between the capitalist mode of production and the communist mode of production, is tainted by the flaws of capitalism, and does not easily escape from it.

FS and MB: Is it really the only place where one can say that an original path has been taken or attempted?

AS: In my eyes, yes, because Cuba has, so far, followed too closely the Soviet model. Vietnam, meanwhile, had to endure the terrible wounds of forty years of war. The Vietnamese themselves say that at the beginning they made rather bureaucratic decisions inspired, precisely, by the Soviet model. Over the last few years they have been trying to depart from this model, but it's not easy.

FS and MB: According to you, then, a phase has just ended, but that does not put an end to the need to build socialist societies?

AS: We must see the events in their historical perspective. Capitalism is the culmination of more than four centuries of transition from feudalism, and four further centuries have since passed. In fact, as early as the fourteenth century, Portugal made a bourgeois revolution that lasted a few decades, before failing. So, that the first socialist revolution failed after 60 years, after being misled so quickly, is tragic, but it is only a moment on the scale of centuries that the transition from capitalism to communism will demand. You know this, when you live the reality of capitalism in a third world country.

FS and MB: There is considerable disagreement among all the parties in the world today that take the work of Marx as a common source and reference-point. Many are going through an identity crisis; some have drawn the conclusion that socialism is no longer the order of the day, others not, how do you situate yourself?

AS: I am not in agreement, as you will have gathered, with the first group you mention: those parties, some of whom have changed their name, are sinking into solutions that might be called social democratic. However, I do not mean that, in relation to the sclerosis that previously marked many of these parties, openness is not necessary. It is, but provided you know how to set limits on that openness.

To take up the question of democratic centralism. In the organization *Ilā al-Amām*, we have reflected on it a great deal, and we also have experience of a very substantial opening to democracy, with new forms (that, one day, I will attempt to theorize), which favour democracy over centralism, without at all abandoning the latter. The general idea is of opening debates as much as possible, and that each person finds in the other something that is right. Nobody is ever entirely correct, no more the leaders than the militants as the base. Every militant must try to understand the other. In a revolutionary party, imbued with these ideas, rooted in the working class, the search for truth must be a collective search, without an idea that it's own point of view, or the current to which one might be attached, alone carries the truth.

I'm not in agreement with the notion of tendencies, since they only freeze this search into so many different currents; but, I'm no longer in agreement with the classical methods in the communist parties, in which theses are prepared in advance by the leadership, which then together uses every means to elaborate these theses. From the beginning, whether intended or not, this method reduces the possibilities of more open debates in a communist party. I don't say it's easy, either. But there must be a search for more open ways, a little like those that Lenin and the Bolshevik party practiced before the October Revolution, and in the first years that followed.

FS and MB: Among the received ideas that, in France, have endured [*ont en France le vie dure*]: that Marxism will not find root in the Muslim countries. You have registered your strong objection to this idea. Why?

AS: We should recognize that the notion of a "model" is now in tatters. The communist parties born in the Arab countries have not known how to integrate themselves with the realities of the Arab world. There has been some important cases, like the Iraqi Communist Party, which was the only large revolutionary party in the country but, in its servility towards the Soviet Union, it blocked two uprisings, in 1948 and 1959. On this point, we return to an idea already formulated in this book [i.e., *Dans les Prisons du Roi*]: in the countries of the third world - and this is especially true in the Arab countries -one cannot dissociate the problem of the class struggle from the question of identity.

FS and MB: The pre-eminence of the Soviet model - is this the only explanation for the difficulties for the revolutionary current in the land of Islam?

AS: There is another reason. The "Menshevik" conception, of leaving the leadership of the country to the national bourgeoisie, which has long prevailed, absolutely must be overcome. In the countries of the third world, when this bourgeoisie exists, it does not have the strength to lead the revolution. Many parties have floundered in such waters. When they have tried to break from this, it was through relying only on the concept of the class struggle, without integrating the problem of identity; and on this point, they have left the field free to Islamist movements. Unhappily, such is the situation in most of the Arab countries.

FS and MB: Without exceptions?

AS: *Si*. The currents which have distinguished themselves from these processes and which were, incidentally, born outside of such parties, are embodied in the the two Marxist-Leninist organizations of the Palestinian revolution; the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). These currents have gained some results, above all in South Yemen, and are gathering steam, even though they confront many difficulties in a unified Yemen. This

country is, in the Arab east, the only one where there exists a prospect of democratic development and of a modern state.

FS and MB: How is the problem of Marxism and belief posed in Morocco?

AS: The old idea that communism is opposed to belief has taken root in Morocco. Not speaking of religion, and ignoring Islam, has been adopted as a tactic by the parties speaking in the name of Marxism. This is not a serious position. In 1967, after the shock of the Six-Day War, I began to reflect on this.

In 1983, I wrote *Marxisme et religion*, [9] in which I showed the possible tactical convergences between Marxists and believers, and even more than that – that there is not between us a strategic antagonism. Nothing stops those believers participating in the construction of communism, and there’s no reason why religion wouldn’t exist in a communist society.

In 1989, the journal *Ilā al-Amām* published a text, even more precise than that. In our revolutionary program, we integrate Islam as a cultural – rather than political – component of the future republic. Islam, for the Morocco people, is summarized by one word, one concept: “*al-Ḥaq*,” which is to say, Justice and Rights. We propose a society which responds to this; the dominant Islamist movements currently lag far behind on this. We hope that a “liberation theology” emerges from within Islam, as with the Catholics in Latin America. But we are unable to accept either *shari‘ah*, or any fettering of the liberation of women.

FS and MB: The fact that Hassan II is the “Commander of the Believers” – is this not an important aspect of the current situation in Morocco?

AS: The king has a religious apparatus which, by the way, does not conform to Islam, which does not allow for one. Hassan II attempts, with this, to control everything, and he intervenes in issues of faith, with the result that even believers have moved away from official practices.

FS and MB: But Hassan II, is he not attempting to use Islam as one of his shields?

AS: He reads from the *intégriste* book, but compromises it at the same time. [10] For him and for the *intégristes* militias, the principal enemy is the revolutionary movement, notably the Marxist Leninists. The militias in question resort to fascist methods to crush the revolutionary movement in the universities.

That said, I’m hesitant to confuse Islamist militants – I would meet them in prisons, and face the [unreadable] – and *intégrisme*, as organized and financed – as has been proved – by Saudi Arabia, and which is in alliance, indeed, with the dictator [Hassan II].

But, I think *intégrisme* has less of an audience among us than in other countries, especially those in the wider Maghreb. This comes from the emergence of a truly revolutionary perspective and movement in Morocco, proof that there is no better barrier to *intégrisme* than living Marxism. That said, the game is not won. To win it, would take more daring, even more determination, more unity; it would take all the democratic forces to defeat the tyranny of the *Makhzan* and Hassan II.

– Translated by Roberto Mozzachiodi and Joe Hayns

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P.S.

Viewpoint Magazine

<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2019/03/05/decidedly-marxist-an-interview-with-abraham-serfaty-1992/>

Footnotes

[1] For further details on Serfaty and Jewish Moroccan radicalism, see Alma Rachel Heckman's 2015 UCLA PhD thesis, [Radical Nationalists: Moroccan Jewish Communists 1925-1975](#). For the best shorter account of Serfaty's life, see Susan Slymomic, "[Abraham Serfaty: Moroccan Jew and Conscious Pariah](#)," *Hespéris-Tamuda* 51, no. 3 (2016): 113-141.

[2] On the dockworkers' strikes and especially the simultaneous *yaouleds* ("[lumpen] youth") protests, see Bruno de Rotalier's 2002 essay "[Les yaouleds \(enfants des rues\) de Casablanca et leur participation aux émeutes de décembre 1952](#)," for the *Revue d'histoire de l'enfance "irrégulière."*

[3] See Serfaty and Abdellatif Zeroual's "[Les Contradictions de l'Ennemi et la Perspective Révolutionnaire au Maroc](#)," published in Ilā al-Amām's journal in September 1972. In 1974, Zeroual was disappeared, tortured, and murdered by the Moroccan police.

[4] On Ilā al-Amām, see Ghassane Koumiya's recent essay for Verso blog, "[Post-68 Student Uprisings and the Rise of the Moroccan Marxist-Leninist Movement](#)."

[5] As Olivia C. Harrison and Teresa Villa-Ignacio wrote in their introduction to *Souffles - Anfas: A Critical Anthology from the Moroccan Journal of Culture and Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

[6] See Alma Rachel Heckman, "[Jewish Radicals of Morocco: Case Study for a New Historiography](#)," *Jewish Social Studies* 23, no. 3 (2018): 67-100.

[7] "Root" is Serfaty's own metaphor, found in his 2001 autobiography, written in dialogue with Mikhaël Elbaz, *L'insoumis: Juifs, Marocains et rebelles* (Paris : Desclée de Brouwer, 2001): "I remember my father saying in the Synagogue, when I was ten years old, 'Zionism is against our religion.' I remember a pilgrimage with my parents, at the age of fourteen, to the tomb of Rabbi Amran Ben Diwan, under the olive tree of Asjen, near Ouezzane. This past - what did it matter that I no more believe in god? I could no more tear it from my being than I could the tree from the earth, this tree under which my ancestors had prayed. My roots are here, in the depths of this soil. Would I accept my Jewish Moroccan brothers going to the Holy Land, the land of Palestine, where Rabbi Amran himself came from, to tear olive trees from the earth? Could I accept they'd go, to execute half-naked Palestinians? Against all this, I screamed." (18; in Slymomic's essay, as cited above)."

[8] *Translators' Note*: Corsican-Algerian Laurent Casanova was among the generation of young intellectuals who gravitated toward the the French Communist Party (PCF) in the twenties for its stance against French involvement in the Rif war. He was in charge of relations between intellectuals and culture for the PCF under Maurice Thorez's leadership, and was responsible for imposing Zhdanovist censorship rules over French communist intellectuals during the 1950s.

[9] *TN*: A text collected in *Dans les prisons du Roi*.

[10] *TN*: *Intégriste* is often translated as fundamentalist, but it has precise connotations in Moroccan society. On the term *intégriste* in Morocco, Khalid Madhi writes that "(f)ollowing the French media categorisations, members of the Moroccan francophone élite refer to its Islamist antagonists as *intégriste*." For a genealogy of such signifiers in Morocco, see Madhi's article "[Islamism\(s\) and the](#)

[Arab uprisings: between commanding the faithful and mobilising the protestor,](#)” *Journal of North African Studies* 18, no. 2 (2013): 248-271.