



Reviews of books

Cristiana Strava, *Precarious Modernities: Assembling State, Space and Society on the Urban Margins in Morocco*. London: Bloomsbury (hb £90 – 978 1 3502 3254 9; pb £28.99 – 978 1 3502 3258 7). 2021/2023, 216 pp.

Precarious Modernities centres around urban life in Hay Mohammadi, a historically marginalized neighbourhood on the outskirts of Casablanca, Morocco. How its residents see themselves is part of their daily negotiation of economic hardship and social stigmatization. Hay Mohammadi is a site of struggle, between insurgent local inhabitants, who shun ‘visibility’,¹ with one resident asserting that ‘[w]e don’t need tourists to come and look at us’, and external actors such as heritage activists, international NGOs and governmental bodies.

Strava does more than just orchestrate an academic ethnographic symphony of regret; she has brought her personal insights into dialogue with historical, theoretical and local perspectives that – on their own – cannot articulate the paradoxical modernity of a precarious cityness. The new housing system, ostensibly architecturally innovative, reveals itself as a hub of decay, degradation and exclusion. Hay Mohammadi, comprising labourers, slum dwellers and students, boils with state antagonism and anti-system grudge, which date back to the Years of Lead. This book, to be sure, is not about a city that accommodates, but about a city that splits and spits its dwellers. Strava skilfully lays bare how the neighbourhood shoves the edges further outwards, expanding the boundaries of precarity and social exclusion.

The book succeeds in making us see how so-called urban development strategies can generate micro-factories for the production of the urban marginality and *hogra* (humiliation) that provoked the Hirak Movement in the Rif region in 2017. In this hostile environment, *modernité* (modernity) is less a beacon of progress, embodying colonial illusions of development, and more a ‘*mort-dernité*’ (modernity of death), an era of social death, necropolitics, risk and rottenness. Strava has exposed the dilemma of *sakan al iqtisadi* (economical housing); the economical-ness at play here has nothing to do with wanting people to have homes or being fair to their pockets, but rather a methodical and systematic economizing on their dreams, dignities and basic decency.

Another strength of the book lies in the parody it unveils by juxtaposing grandiose governmental development projects with the chaotic outcomes they generate. These projects often erase ‘informal’ spaces, stifle creative ethnographies, exacerbate

¹ B. Dicks (2004) *Culture on Display: the production of contemporary visibility*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

socio-spatial inequalities, and suppress youth subculture and artistic grassroots movements by labelling them as delinquent and criminal. This gives birth to inequalities that are starkly evident in projects such as the forced relocation of residents from informal settlements to new suburban areas such as Lahraouiyyine, justified under the state's 'Cities without Slums' initiative. Strava reveals that, far from promoting social integration and economic advancement, these projects lead to alienation, exclusion and racism. Strava's critique of urban renewal projects that risk perpetuating socio-economic marginalization critiques a *mort-dernité* that draws more from the temperament of 'cement' than the ontological jazz of 'building'.

Strava combines a rigorous ethnographic approach with innovative citizen science methods, immersing herself in the community through long-term participation, observation and interviews with a diverse range of residents. She encourages participants to defy rigid structures by capturing their memories and stories through drawings and hand-sketched maps. These maps, created by locals such as Asma Adil and Fatna El Bouih in Hay Mohammadi, contrast sharply with official maps that tend to sanitize and fix the history of the district. This book has successfully interrogated the silences and gaps left by other research concerning urban affect, re-membering and dis-membering selected historical truths, and urban healing – recovering from historical trauma – by imagining hopeful urban futures.

Strava employs a compelling multimedia methodological framework that allows members of the neighbourhood to effect an exorcism of Hay Mohammadi's deep-seated significations through photovoice, ambient sound recordings and drawings, which are erected, like the talismans and sigils of the underground, against municipal structuration and forced reallocation schemes. This approach aims to energize future urban planning and memory making with diverse and inclusive participatory methods, incorporating local visions from the present as well as memories from the past. The book chronicles how urban spaces can become traumatized territories, exemplified by neighbourhoods such as Hay Mohammadi, which is among the country's 'wounded territories' (*territoires touchés*) (p. 41) – places that have yet to fully confront and heal from human rights abuses endured under King Hassan II's regime. Under the guise of modernity's promise of renewal, the book reveals a continuation of past traumas and injustices.

Precarious Modernities represents a pivotal contribution to urban studies and postcolonial scholarship, offering a profound understanding of urban precarity through an interdisciplinary lens. This compelling, well-researched book offers a fascinating analytical and theoretical framework, chronicling over half a century of urban struggles, frustrations and aspirations within a single neighbourhood.

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