Nearly forty years ago Jacques Berque wrote that forms of Berber social organization “provide a vigorous safeguard for one of the Maghreb’s most hopeful features, its communal solidarity” (1967: 218). Now, between an accelerating neo-liberal reconstruction of the Moroccan economy and the increasing potency of international political Islam, between race riots in France and bread riots in Casablanca, it might seem a curious time to examine what “vigorous safeguards” for communal solidarity are still available. It might seem even more curious to examine this “hope” in the context of the rising incidence of rural children migrating for urban wage labor, a phenomenon that has in Morocco elicited visceral horror and bureaucratic exasperation more than anything remotely resembling optimism.

While I do not intend to excuse the exploitation of children, I will contend that rural children’s urban wage labor demonstrates, if not hope, then what can be hoped for in today’s Morocco. I will suggest that our discomfort with working children, and in particular what are in Morocco called “little maids” or petites bonnes, can be read as a disruption of Liberal mesconnaissance – a momentarily uncomfortable clarity vis-à-vis the logic of capital (Bourdieu 1979). The seeming collapse of the divide between familial intimacy and what seems crassly economic offends our basic faith that the market and the family are separable spheres. However, the discomforts of the children themselves are less about this, about anomie, the violation of innocence, or a social atomization wrought by capital expansion, than something closer to what Durkheim called “altruistic suicide.” I am not arguing that this is better or worse than other sorts of social pathologies, only that we should not mistake the maladies of one social order for those of another.

These suggestions rest on a scaffolding of sub-arguments that I will try to erect before moving on to an ethnographic consideration of child labor in the High Atlas, why and how it occurs, and what it might tell us about Berber social solidarity – and solidarity more generally -- in our new millennium.

Amazigh / Berber Social Organization

Social solidarity is an old concern among Europeans. The disciplines of sociology and anthropology grew from a troubled apprehension of the modern era: Tonnies’s pessimistic appraisal of gesellschaft, Durkheim’s paralyzing fear of anomie, Weber’s ambivalence over bureaucratic authority, and Marx’s portentous maulderings on alienation, private property, and human nature. Jacque Berque’s search for hope in a transforming Morocco thus rests on a mountain of European pessimism about the trajectory of what used to be grandiloquently called “civilization.” Such matters are far from settled. How we take care of one another in an atomized, anonymous economy grounded in the material fecundity of institutionalized selfishness remains a core problem in social theory, not to mention political practice. Cosmopolitans are still working abstractly on the question, and, I will suggest, High Atlas farmers are actively grappling with it too.

To cite farmers here is not simple mischief. Rural Imazighen, and rural North Africans more generally, have provided key evidence for contemplation of social solidarity. From Ibn Khaldun’s dialectical ‘asabiya to de Toqueville’s musings on Algeria, from Durkheim’s theories
of mechanical and organic solidarity to Gellner’s segmentary schema: how Berbers and other North Africans have organized their struggles has long fascinated professional thinkers. This has been especially true of rural Berbers. The material lives of Berber farmers and pastoralists have been and continue to be productive of a wide variety of discourses that do work far beyond the context of rural Morocco.

For instance, Jane Goodman has written, “The Berber village has been ‘good to think’ across three discursive traditions --colonial, anthropological, and activist-- for well over a century” (2005:69), and she makes a solid case for her assertion. She cites Hanoteau and Letourneux’s confident statement in 1872 that “to make known the [Kabyle] village is to make known the whole society” (ibid), and along with others she points out that the Berberness of the iconic village played an important role in the French imperial imagination. It seems clear that “the village” continues to function in many versions of the Berber social imaginary, not least in terms of the “structural nostalgia” so important to transnational Amazigh / Berber consciousness (Silverstein 2004).

And it is hardly just villages that have served farmers, thinkers, and theorists. “Tribes,” too, have been “good to think” for many people, and in Morocco have been even more celebrated, along with the genealogical, segmentary means of organizing them. Here again it is not the brute facts of social organization but specific and widely abstracted implications that have captivated the minds of intellectuals. For example, Ernest Gellner writes of the saintly lineages of Ait ‘Atta Berbers, “Here, a separation of powers is not merely a check on tyranny, as intended in classical political theory, but also a check on inequality. The inegalitarian potential of society is as it were drained by the saints. Here, at least, equality and liberty go together” (1969:64). As a matter of material fact, Gellner’s saints do (or did) live in villages rather than roaming the conceptual ether in evanescent tribes, but for Gellner villages are not so good to think. Indeed, they are irrelevant even as places to live. Saintly significance inheres in saintly litigation, baraka-suffused maneuverings that serve to construct and define the contentious terrain of tribal borders. Gellner favors tribal dynamics, in other words, which are important to him not for their Berber essence or North African location, but because they illuminate the limitations of “classical political theory.” Here “classical” means “European.”

There are of course other ways to think about Berber sociality, too. From Montagne’s lfuf and sfuf moieties (Montagne 1973), to overdrawn assertions of a general Berber siba standing in contradistinction to an Arab bled al-makhzen: there has been no shortage of discursive frames that have served to put Berbers to work in understanding social processes, philosophical positions, historical trajectories, academic tyrannies, and political conundrums. The overwhelming diversity of actual Berber social life is probably one reason for this abounding service to academic humanity (as I argue in Crawford, 2005), a diversity that we find subtly articulated in Berque’s own definitively plural Structures sociales du Haut-Atlas (1978), and in contemporary work by Ali Amahan (1998) and Hassan Rachik (1990, 1992). It is, I think, the resiliency of this diversity that gives Berque his hope, and if we want to essentialize this as Berber, then the widely noted, continual, creative reorganization of Berber life may not be unrelated to a range of contemporary phenomena, from the proliferation of “cultural associations” in the Moroccan countryside all the way up to the new, national Institut Royal de la culture amazighe (IRCAM).

My intervention here is to suggest more attention to the political economy of these social modalities. Pre-eminently, to my mind, this means attention to household dynamics, the social form Berbers call tikatin (sing. takat). A takat is the most basic economic association in the
mountains, but is also literally a bread oven, and thus resonates well with the French foyer or the English “hearth.” I would not contend that households are more important than other levels of rural social organization (lineages, for instance, or tribes, villages, political parties or newly arising associations of all sorts), but rather that understanding household dynamics is vital to understanding these other social forms, and to understanding how they operate in the broader political economy of wage labor and state power. I argue that what Nicolas Michel calls “l’économie de subsistances” (1997:3) is fundamentally a household affair, and I agree with him that it represents not only an economic mode, but a set of values.

Perhaps this is an artefact of the kind of place where I do my research—a very poor, very labor intensive mountain agricultural community—but at least in this context households are the fundamental institution of labor organization, production, and consumption. Contra Hoffman’s classic statement on the matter, households are not “nuclear families” (Hoffman 1967:46). They are instead economic entities, a defined group of people who share labor and its rewards. Tikatin are generally organized around the production of children, as children are key to rural production, but not all households contain children or even married adults, and thus households should not be reduced to or saddled with the Western notion of a “nuclear family.” Households contain many differently related people whose distinguishing characteristic is that they pool resources, they work together and divide the rewards. I do not suggest by this a radical empiricism where households exist “out there” for inspection, but as a “theoretical apparatus” (Trouillot 2001:136) households are very “good to think.” They have the distinct advantage of being cross culturally identifiable, and they are obviously important to the rural Berbers I know.

The bad news about this in a general sense is that our economic understanding of households is rudimentary. Amartya Sen, winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize in economics, writes that “Inequality inside the household is one of resource-use and of the transformation of the used resources into capability to function, and neither class of information is well captured by any devised notion of ‘income distribution’ within the family” (1992:122-123). While the focus on “resource use” may be more apposite for non-agricultural, non-subsistence oriented households, the basic idea that within households people have motivations that cannot be reduced to self-interest confounds liberal economic theory at its core. Deidre McCloskey (also an economist, and still a neo-liberal one despite other transformations) puts the issue in broader perspective in a discussion of free trade. She writes, “Suppose a big part of the economy—say the household—is, as the economists put it, ‘distorted’ (e.g., suppose people in households do things for love: you can see that the economists have a somewhat peculiar idea of ‘distortion’). Then it follows rigorously (that is to say, mathematically) that free trade in other sectors (e.g., manufacturing) will not be the best thing. In fact it can make the average person worse off than restricted, protected, tariffed trade would” (2002:17 emphasis original).

In the mountains households are not “a big part” of the economy, they are the very basis of it. Thus, without taking up the “free trade” part of McCloskey’s argument, we can still say that because the rural economy is based in and on households, economic theories devised to understand the changing rural economy are of little use in understanding village level dynamics. This has confused anthropological as well as economic work—including my own—on various levels of social life in rural Morocco. People do things for their household members that they would not do for others, thus general theories of the reasons people exchange with or work for one another are undermined because the exchanges happen among household members. The typically long-term exchanges between households (within lineages, for instance) serves to amplify this confusion.
Zeliger’s work on the “purchase of intimacy” goes some way towards salvaging overly reductive accounts that separate the love and intimacy of household interactions from any kind of economic behavior, and also works to undermine “merely cultural,” “merely economic,” or “merely political” version of household economics. Ultimately Zeliger asserts that the distinctions between economic and intimate spheres—between love and money—must be energetically reinforced and reveals a kind of “relational work,” work equally necessary for keeping such spheres separate (as in Western middle class understandings of proper family life) or integrating them (as is more normal in poor, household based rural economies). However, despite her protestations, this would seem to be ultimately a culturalist account, as it does not explain why, for instance, urban Moroccans believe parents should sacrifice for their children and rural Moroccans believe children should sacrifice for parents.

This failure to understanding the economy of household affection is problematic on many levels, not least because villages are where globalization is “happening,” i.e. villagers live in the places where the world economy is expanding to. While we know perfectly well why international capital seeks new opportunities (profits are motivating to people motivated by profits), we know very little about why farmers do or do not become workers, why they choose or choose not to become embroiled in the larger economic schema. Part of the answer is surely demographic, and crudely economic: the mountains have for millennia produced more people than the land can support, ensuring that a steady stream of labor flows out of the hills along with the melting snow. For cultural, agricultural, and economic reasons the High Atlas is and has long been a demographic pump. But how people flow, who exactly migrates and why, and what sorts of connections migrants retain with the rural economy, is much less well understood. Part of the reason for this is because migration decisions occur in the household context. Thus, because economists do not well understand the curiously tangled, long term combination of affection and exploitation inherent in household production, and because households are key to demographic growth and migration (amongst other things), it would seem we have few theoretical tools to understand the articulation between the rural household economy and the larger wage labor sector.

In this section I have tried to make the case that Berber social solidarity is grounded fundamentally in the bundle of intimate economic exchanges contained within households. It is households that comprise lineages, villages and tribes, cantons and notional homelands (timizar), households that reproduce the material and cultural order, households that constitute the human bodies on which and through which so much discursive labor is expended. Why households have been relatively ignored in Moroccan scholarship in favor of other social forms is an interesting topic in its own right, but if we are going to assess “hope” for Berbers, or for the Maghreb more generally, if we are going to ponder what can be hoped for in Morocco in the face of global capital expansion, it makes good sense to start by examining how rural households are coping, how they struggle with the perils and potential of the wage labor economy and its associated political regimes. One way they cope is by sending their children to the city to work.

Child Labor in Morocco

It is hard to deny the horrors associated with child labor in urban Morocco. Droves of homeless children wander Casablanca, many of them runaways from tyrannical bosses and abusive foster families, seeking solace in tattered rags soaked with industrial glue. As Maghraoui notes, “in Casablanca, a city of three million people, some 10,000 homeless children fall prey to drug and prostitution rings. By comparison, Sao Paulo, Brazil, a city of more than 10
million people, has 5,000 homeless children” (2001:16). Many thousands of other “non-homeless” Moroccan children work as beggars, shoeshine boys, touts, carpet manufacturers, agricultural laborers on large farms, and so forth. Amongst the most emotionally wrenching of all child labor, however, is that of girls sent to work in urban households. While difficult to estimate, the practice of hiring petites bonnes is very widespread. There are perhaps 60,000 to 100,000 Moroccan girls between seven and fifteen years-old working in households that are not their own. The fact that this work occurs in the affectively charged confines of “the home,” the sense of innocence betrayed, and the terrible gulf between servant and served all jolt our sense of justice and familial normalcy--and hint at a dark underside to Morocco (and beyond) that few of us want to contemplate.

The BBC minces no words in their report on the topic, painting a picture of endemic social despair reminiscent of Dickens’s London:

“‘Parents are raising their children for sale,’ says Bashir Nzaggi, news editor with the respected Moroccan newspaper, Liberation. ‘They send them to work in the towns, and never see them except to collect their pay-packets.’ …. According to a recent government survey, 2.5 million children aged under 15 drop out of school, and more than half a million work. Many pursue the tradition of toil in the fields. But in exchange of $30 a month, tens of thousands of parents are now contracting their children to urban families to work as domestic servants in conditions of near slavery. Dealers earn up to $200 per child. It's so institutionalized that kitchens are designed with low counters for child-maids to wash and cut vegetables.”

If the BBC writes indignantly about parents colluding with “dealers,” industrial child-production, and “near slavery,” the Human Rights Internet (which is linked to the United Nations Human Rights System), gives the parents of working girls more credit, suggesting a system that is broken rather than one deliberately promulgating evil. They summarize their report on labor conditions with less bombast than the BBC, but with equally clear condemnation:

“General points made under the heading ‘economic exploitation’ included the following: The widespread abuse of young girls working as household maids, or petites bonnes, is among the most serious problems confronting children; in most cases, these girls - 50 percent of whom are below the age of 10 - are sent by their families from rural areas to work as maids in houses in the cities; often the parents genuinely believe that they are doing the best for their child; other parents see their daughters as a lucrative source of revenue; often an agreement will have been reached with the future employer that the child will receive a certain number of hours of education each week. The results of various studies of the situation of these girls, however, showed that, for example: in most cases, the work involved cleaning and general housework, looking after the children and doing the cooking for the whole family; the working day often began before 7:00 a.m. and did not end until after 11:00 p.m.; the child's salary was usually US$30/month and was sent directly to the parents; in some cases, parents were not allowed to visit their daughters; others were allowed only one visit per month with parents; some parents only visited their daughter to collect her salary; up to 70 percent of the girls did not receive any education, regardless of the agreements made before the child left her parents; up to 50 percent had no access to medical care.”

It is difficult to remain unmoved by such accounts. Even the US Department of Labor concurs, noting that “the Government of Morocco is taking steps to address the
country’s child labor problem” in a report connected with the establishment of a free trade agreement between the US and Morocco. This report is an attempt to adhere to the spirit of US laws concerning trade pacts that depend upon the “elimination of the worst forms of child labor.” This report mentions “child labor” in the Moroccan context no less than thirty-eight times in twenty-six pages and is a deeply depressing read.

A parallel US Department of Labor Report (also from July 2004) entitled “Laws Governing Exploitative Labor Report – Morocco” is much shorter. It admits there is no “universal definition of exploitative child labor” (page 3), and seeks only to comment on the “worst forms of child labor” as defined by the International Labor Organization. These include, “all forms of slavery,” “procuring a child for prostitution,” using children for the “production and trafficking in drugs,” and work which “by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children” (ibid. 4). This report is concerned only to make clear that there are relevant laws in Morocco against such outrages, and thus that the free trade agreement between the US and Morocco does not transgress norms of the International Labor Organization. Others, including human rights groups and the Moroccan government, take up the task of assessing why these laws are ineffective.

Human rights activists, and specifically child rights groups like “Save the Children,” place some of the blame on the adoption or foster parenting of girls, which is seen in many cases to way to lock children into conditions of domestic servitude. Save the Children notes, for instance, that 5.3% of girls in urban households were living in situations without any kin present, the presumption being that these girls may be petites bonnes (Pedersen 2001:17). The report suggests that survey methods undercount such situations, however, as unrelated household members are often ignored by the persons completing questionnaires. Overall in this report the work of the girls in urban homes is explicitly understood as an alternative to education by all parties involved (Sommerfelt 2001:28); maids do not expect to be treated as members of the household in which they work (ibid. 33).

It would seem that one main difficulty in making sense of child labor is a matter of clarifying the category. Children made to do the family dinner dishes is obviously a different issue than children forced into prostitution or treated as household slaves. Clearly the “worst forms of child labor” are very bad indeed, and that too many girls find themselves adopted into conditions of “near slavery” cannot be comfortably countenanced by very many of us. However, it is unclear what percentage of child laborers in Morocco, or specifically petites bonnes, are working under these conditions, and how many are working under conditions that are actually better than the rural world they have left behind. Anglophone anthropology, my own discipline, has made a cottage industry of studying Morocco, but we have not exactly condemned or very often even acknowledged the treatment of children there. We have been very interested in Morocco, in other words, but relatively uninterested in what we might consider the less palatable political or economic features of Moroccan life. Only recently have anthropologists begun to assess human rights travesties and other sensitive issues in the Kingdom (see for example Slyomovics 2005).

The Moroccan government seems, in fact, ahead of most US scholars. One academic working for the Ministry of Planning produced a report that calls child labor a “taboo topic” and cites work by the Ligue marocaine pour la protection de l’enfance to
say that a total of 16% of all petites bonnes had a deceased father, 5% a deceased mother, but fully 72% still had living (but presumably impoverished) parents. In other words, according to at least some accounts, the majority of maids cite their family’s poverty as a main reason they are working in the city, but do not typically refer to the breakdown of their family unit. Assumedly the wages of these girls are returned to their families. This suggests that while there are clearly many girls in very precarious, social situations who work as child maids, the majority in fact remain economically embedded in rural households that they continue to serve. Clearly we must look to the dynamics of rural households to understand children’s urban wage labor.

Down to the Cemetery, Down to the City

In the village where I have done most of my research there is a morbid vein of humor that involves a play on the word “city” (medina or l’medint), which is also sometimes used for “cemetery.” There is, in other words, a certain death in the city, as you leave the living body of the natal community and exist amongst strangers, in a social vacuum. Still, the city is attractive to some. Young men explain to me that they would not mind spending part of the year in the city (especially the cold winter months) and many young women would be very happy to find an employed urban husband who could deliver them from the drudgery of rural labor. Some claim they would prefer to work in urban households than in their own rural setting. The sentiments held by the rural young are relatively unimportant, however. A young person does not decide to go to the city any more than she decides when it is time to die; young people go to the city when they are sent to the city, when fate, or their father, decrees.

Whether or not a young person is sent to the city depends upon the decision of the household patriarch, and this decision is based on the condition of the household economy. Surely everyone who sends a daughter out of the mountains to work is “poor” in the view of anyone reading these words, but rural poverty is a more complicatedly variable condition than urbanites tend to assume. The example of the migrant girls in the two households below should serve to make this clear.

We should note at the outset that it is quite normal for children to move between villages through networks of female kin. As most girls marry out of their natal lineages and villages, women come to have relations spread across the rural landscape. In summers especially women go home to visit, or move through the mountains to vacation with their mothers’ relatives, married sisters, and so forth. Children commonly accompany their mothers, and sometimes children are left behind, exchanged for periods of time. Since rural children (and especially girls) work for whatever household they live in, we can say that prior to integration with the wage labor economy rural children are already quite frequently “economic migrants.” The crucial role of woman and children in the village economy, and specifically the role of women’s social networks, is strikingly absent from the Moroccan anthropological literature.

Household #1

“Omar” and “Khadija” are unusual in the village of Tadrar in that they maintain their own household despite the fact that Omar’s father is still alive. Normally, because sons do not inherit land until the death of the patriarch, and women receive half the land that their brothers do, couples cannot form independent households until the death of a
patriarch and the subsequent division of land. Couples may live in a different house, but they remain part of the extended patriarchal household, an economic unit grounded (literally) in rights to irrigated land. Boys and men owe their fathers labor so long as the father is alive, and married women, through their husbands, owe their labor to this same household.

However, Omar has managed circumvent this in part by working in the city out of season (and returning to work with his brother for his father during peak agricultural periods), and by sending his daughters to work in the city. He has built his own house and is largely separated from his father’s support, and partly separated from economic obligations to him.

Omar’s oldest daughter, Fatime, works in Casablanca as a maid, and previously worked in Agadir. The next oldest, Naima, remains in the village to assist her mother with the younger children and to help with the household. The next oldest daughter, Mina, began work in Marrakech as a maid as of 1999, and her younger sister Fatima began working in Marrakech in 2002. Malika, Najat, and the youngest boy Lachen all live in the village.

It was very difficult for me (as a male, an outsider, and a nominal Christian) to interview these or any other daughters. During my original research in 1998-99 I was single and understood to be wealthy, and this made me a frequent object of marriage negotiations, and made interviews with unmarried women awkward. Compounding the difficulty is the sensitive nature of sending young girls to the city. Omar was certainly not proud of sending his children away. When visiting, the girls seemed to have visibly warm relations with their family. It has to be a tough decision to send a child away to work, but the reason is not a blanket state of “poverty” or disregard for children. Instead, the long term dynamics of households (Omar’s father still being alive) and demographics (Omar’s household has too many girls for the needs of the household) shape who migrates, when, and why. The most sensible way in which the girls can contribute to Omar’s household is to work for wages. Contributing to the household is utterly sensible to these girls.

The normalcy of rural girls deciding to (or at least accepting) work in the city is borne out in other studies. In a research trip to study the migration of rural girls Sommerfelt writes, “in surprisingly many cases… girls not only claimed to want to go working in town, but also pushed their parents or siblings to find them a job as a maid in town….” (2001:43). These researchers spoke with a young woman who had returned from the city (she worked in Tangiers from age six to age seventeen) who only decided to return to the village because of a desire to help her ailing mother. The timing of the return was facilitated by the fact that three other younger sisters had found work in the city and were returning wages. Households are built of long term exchanges of love and labor, and short term wage labor is integrated into these longer cycles.

Household #2

Culturally valued fidelity to a household does not prevent girls from breaking away, however. Young women do not typically pursue “independence” like young men do, by heading off to work and then establishing their own households. Instead, girls seek to find work in the city and thereby to arrange their own marriages, to link themselves to a male wage laborer and establish a household where they can raise children of their own; young women typically accomplish this with the help of other (usually female) relatives in the city. Again, I am privy to only bits of these transactions as they tend to take place outside the village (I did almost no
research in urban areas) and amongst women (with whom my interactions were limited, especially in the case of unmarried women).

The case of Mohammed is illustrative. He has one of the largest families in the village—nine girls and five boys in my 1999 census—at least partly because he has more land than almost anyone. As the sole heir of one of the main sub-lineages of the most powerful *ikhs*, or “bone” in the village, Mohammed is, on paper at least, one of the wealthiest men in the community. He is ranked second of twenty-nine households in the village in total irrigation time, with three times the village median irrigation time, and six times that of the poorest households. Irrigation time is hardly the only important economic factor, but it is well correlated with land ownership and thus to general economic well being (Crawford 2001:293).

Mohammed has not been blessed with easy demographics, however. His five oldest children are all girls, and cannot be used for male agricultural work. While this is a good household in which to be a woman (i.e. there are many women to share the labor), it is hard to find a way to put so much female labor to work in the village context, even with a surfeit of agricultural land. By 1999 Mohammed had sent three of his girls to work in the city, Fatima to Casablanca, Kebira and Zahra to Marrakech. All wages were returned to the rural household. I only spoke to one of these young women when she visited the village, but she seemed happy enough. She was an eager participant in water fights with the village boys, and evinced little passion over her urban work, positive or negative. She was clearly more urbane than her rural cousins, for obvious reasons, and she was much more forward than most of the village girls.

However, by 2004 this young woman and her two urbanized sisters were all married to men in the city, depriving Mohammed of income even as the new brides extended their family’s social network out in space. Mohammed then sent another daughter to the city to work, Zaina, and sent his oldest son to study in the city, specifically to live with the oldest daughter and her new husband (both now living in Marrakech). Mohammed is thus continuing to put his “extra” daughters to work, but is also depriving himself of male agricultural labor (a son finally old enough to help with irrigation) in order to better prepare someone in the household for the future. It is clear that Mohammed thinks of girls’ labor differently than boys’; girls work for their mother on women’s chores; boys work directly for Mohammed. The fact that Mohammed is willing to make his own life more difficult by sending away an able bodied boy who might work in the fields is evidence that Mohammed is not lazy, is not some cruel scrooge. He might be sexist, but he is preparing his household for the future by educating one member of it and putting the rest of the household labor resources to use as best he can. At the same time, the children too are doing their part to work for a more secure future. Five of Mohammed’s children now live in Marrakech, forming a kind of urban network of rural offspring, and providing some support for one another and their rural household.

Importantly, Mohammed’s children are not in the city because they are “poor” by village standards. Most of the girls were sent for demographic reasons—there was nothing for so many girls to do despite the material resources the household controlled. The girls relatively quickly put their urban situation to work, evidently, managing to find husbands and establish connections for others to follow. They even allowed for their brother to get an urban education, ensuring that someone in their family might garner some literacy that could help the rest of them more confidently engage the expanding bureaucracy of the state. These two cases serve to illustrate the point that “poverty” is not a simple cause of migration and child labor in the cities.
To better make sense of these two cases, and of the trauma and potential of wage labor for girls, it is necessary to understand the lives girls might want to escape, the working lives of rural Berber women today. For this I turn to the words of Rqia and her husband Brahim as they describe work in the village of Tadrar. Rqia was born outside of Tadrar (like 80% of the women in this village) and moved to live with her husband upon marriage. At the time of the interview the couple had one daughter married and living in Rabat and two married in the village. Their oldest son was at the time of this interview not married, and their youngest son was but a small boy. This means that Brahim had at least one older boy to help him (and even the little boy could do some things), while Rqia was left alone to handle the feminine labor of the household. Brahim has reached “old age,” when he can begin to relax and let his son work for him; Rqia is not quite there, still waiting for her husband to bring her son a wife, a young woman in the household to relieve Rqia of some of the more arduous labor. We taped the interview in October of 1998.  

David: What’s your name?  
Rqia: Rqia. Rqia Hussein Ait O. from A.  
David: From A? [the name of her natal village]  
Rqia: A.  
David: Your ‘asli’ [origins] are in A?  
Rqia: A.  
David: Do you want to talk about women’s lives?  
Rqia: Yeah. Women. You want to speak about women’s lives in [Tadrar.] Yes. We go to the mountains to bring wood, and fodder. We come back and light the ovens, we make bread and put it in the ovens, we milk cows. We make lunch. We do everything like that. We go to fetch water. We go to the river and wash clothes. Everything like this we do. And we prepare wool. We wash wool and card it. We put it on the loom and work on it. Like this women work. They bring fodder for the cows, and give it to them. We milk them and if there is a calf we take him to his mother for some milk. We give them food. We wash dishes, sweep, and shake out the blankets. We fold up the carpets and take them out in the sun to get rid of the bedbugs, if there are any. We feed the chickens and rabbits, if we have any. That’s all we do. We go up there, and come back. They spend their whole day moving.  
David: Moving.  
Rqia: Yeah, moving around. To the mountains for wood, and fodder for the animals. They bring ‘aouri’ [a shrub] and they give it to cows to eat. They prepare something for themselves to eat, they eat it... They go to the fields to bring the cows something to eat, so we can milk her. Because if you don’t give them any fodder, they won’t give you any milk. They come back and prepare dinner. They churn buttermilk...  
[Her small son chimes in: they churn buttermilk...]  
Rqia: They eat a little butter and a little buttermilk. They stir a little ‘tagoula’ [a soupy curdled milk concoction]. They prepare ‘bedaz’ [corn flour porridge]. They prepare couscous, bread, press it in the ovens when they’re hot. They sweep the kitchen, wash the pots, wash the serving dishes, and they take the
trash from the cooking area and throw it out. They carry it in bags and take it far from the house, so that it won’t come back in. Everything they do is like this.

David: Is the life of women harder than men’s life, or easier.

Rqia: Oh no, women’s lives are harder than men’s [laughter]. Their activities [tizla n timgharin] are harder. They go to the mountains for wood and bring food for the cows. When they come in the late afternoon, the light the ovens and prepare food. Men, when they come back from the fields, they ‘take off their belts’ and go to pray. After prayers, they say to women, ‘what have you done, have you prepared lunch or something to eat? You haven’t prepared anything?’ [laughter]. You have not prepared anything!? I am rushing around, but I have not done anything! The oven does not want to light. The wood does not want to light. Like this... men, their job is easy and near by. Women, it’s hard. They spend the whole day rushing, from morning to night.

David: Until afternoon? Until night?

Rqia: Until night, then they can rest. At first light they get up again, and they start hurrying around. And men, they have a little job. They don’t have lots to do. Right?

David: Yeah... [addressing her husband] Do you know it’s like this?

Brahim: Huh?

Rqia: He said to you, do you know that this is true or not?

Brahim: Oh yes!

Rqia: [To David] Have you seen? [laughter]

Brahim: Women of the mountains are always like this, always, always. They bring kindling from the forest. ‘Aouri’ from the forest. They carry it on their backs. Then they take their sickle to the fields, and they gather fodder. They bundle it...

Rqia: We put it here [indicating on her back]

Brahim: They carry it on their backs...

Rqia: ‘hba’ [a word meaning things carried on the back, whether babies, fodder, or wood] ... here [indicating her back].

Brahim: ... when they arrive, they parcel it out to the cows, and they go to see if there is any askeef to drink. If there is none, they light the oven. This is what they do until ten at night. At ten they go to bed. And she gets up at four and goes to the oven. She makes coffee, she makes askeef. She prepares food for the children, and they eat it. She takes her rope to the mountains [e.g. the rope used to carry the bundles of wood]. To bring wood to make fire. After, when she brings the wood, she comes down and eats a little. She takes her basket to the river to bring fodder for the cows. She feeds the children and she takes grain to grind in the river [there was at this time a water powered mill wheel in the river]. She makes tagoula for the children.

David: Phew...

Brahim: That’s all. She does not rest. Never, never.

David: Never.

Brahim: When she finishes one thing, another thing comes.... Men, no. When they irrigate and plough the plots, they go up to the fields. They come back and sit. That’s all their job. That’s all.
David: That’s all?
Brahim: That’s all their job.

Ten days before this, I had interviewed Brahim and Rqia’s daughter Fatima. Fatima had moved to the city after she divorced her first husband, her patrilateral parallel cousin. She lived with her sister for some time in Rabat before returning to Tadrar to marry her present husband. Like her mother, Fatima too gave a long, passionate, and gruellingly detailed iteration of the difficulties of women’s labor, how it changed from season to season, including everything from the leaking mud roofs to the agonies of childbirth and the all too common death of babies and infants. Part of the interview repeated Rqia’s telling of the unequal sexual division of labor, but Fatima seemed to take great pride in being able to do more work than men, in being able to carry more on her back and work more hours, in being able care for her family in the harsh conditions of a mountain agricultural community. Then I asked her:

David: Do you think life in the city is easier?
Fatima: Life in the city is easy, because I have seen it. Life in the city, you find a job, you will work there and your children will go to school. Women work and men. Some might work in a factory. Men, God knows, in whatever he finds he can work in the city. But in the mountains, there is no work. Only wood, fields, that’s all. That’s all the [paying] work in the mountains. But the life in the city is nice (teshwa).

From these interviews it might seem that any woman would want to move to the city, and any man would be reluctant to do so. This is not entirely accurate, however. Rqia, Brahim, and Fatima are deemphasizing the benefits of village life (the safety and security of living amongst people you have known a lifetime, making a living in ways that are difficult but at least reliable), and they are expounding on the benefits of urban life. But Fatima did come back to the village, and Brahim has never discussed taking his household to the city no matter how vehemently Rqia drives home the unfairness of women’s fate. The interviews above were done at a time when Brahim had one grown son at home, a son who did most of the family’s male gendered labor and left his father to, as Rqia says, “take off his belt” and just sit. It is not surprising that Brahim found mountain life pretty good: he was a leisured, propertied patriarch. By 2004, when his son had married and the new bride was brought into the household, Rqia’s life eased some. Rqia became more involved with raising her granddaughter while her teenaged daughter in-law took over some of the heavy labor of wood, fodder, and grain transport.

Fatima’s opinion of city life is based on her sister’s situation: married to a man with a job, the kids in school. This is obviously “nice” compared the women’s labor in the village. Fatima did not suggest that she wanted to go look for a job, however, or that she could find one, or that her husband should, only that a good life could be had in the city, that city life was “nice.” Years later Fatima tried sending her oldest son to the city to live with her sister so that he could go to school. The experiment failed, however, as her boy was homesick, did not easily learn Arabic. He thus did poorly in school, and wanted to come home. Fatima noted that maybe some of her younger children would some day go to live in the city and tap some of the resources available there. To support parents, some children must stay to endure the hardships of rural life. Others will necessarily go down to the city, to the “cemetary.” It is unclear which is preferable.
Child abuse is obviously and rightfully upsetting, but child labor is not necessarily child abuse. In rural Morocco all children work from a very young age. Girls as young as four can be depended upon to care for younger children, carry wood and water, and clean house; boys will start to irrigate and tend goats well before they are teenagers. This is common throughout the continent, indeed throughout the Global South (Kielland and Tovo 2006). It should not be surprising to us that as rural Morocco becomes increasingly articulated with the urban, wage labor economy different values and understandings of child labor come into conflict. Urban scholars and bureaucrats studying labor sometimes choose to ignore children’s work (as when USAID reports pay no attention to children15) but most dwell on it as a moral wrong that can and ought to be ameliorated. I am sympathetic to this position, but it is not without logical as well as practical problems.

In the mountains the alternative to working in the city is not usually school but working in the village. Girls are sent to the city when their labor cannot be put to productive use in the household, or in a related household. It is true that many rural parents do not value education in the same way as urban middle class parents do, but this not necessarily shortsighted. It is not obvious that rural girls stand a better chance of long term personal fulfillment or improved employment options by going to school than they do by working. While education is obviously desirable for many people for many reasons, the opportunity costs of education are easily overlooked. Education for all is a worthy ideal, but from the perspective of rural Moroccans it is not a pragmatic, or even necessarily very sensible, alternative for many children today.

There are two main ways that scholars explain the migration of children: they are victimized by “bad” parents who selfishly exploit them, or they suffer because they have “poor” parents who are forced to forsake parental love for some small amount of money. I have made the case that this is too simple. High Atlas children all “work” in the village –within and without the home—and this does not make parents ignorant, bad, or even especially poor. The many years of grueling education suffered by middle class children around the world might be seen as at least as cruel by some mountain observers. The precariousness of a mountain farming life is indeed the primary issue, but the “poverty” of such lives is more complicated than simple lack of income; poverty relates as much to demography and the gendered dynamics of labor as it does to a paucity of property and the vagaries of the weather.

Today one of the primary terms rural Moroccans use to understand their condition is miskin, “poor” --even in cases where material conditions have evidently improved. Rural poverty is thus both an absolute condition (no medicine, no money, no shoes, no potable water) and a comparative assessment born of an understanding of what other (urban) people have. Rural people attempt to deal with their poverty as households, employing the cultural values inherent in the household economy. They are not socially atomized by the fissiparous allure of Capital, but sustain themselves by incorporating wages into their household bodies; they continue to reproduce these fundamental social bodies through larger lineage and village forms of community, through inter-household and village wide labor exchanges (Crawford 2003). The clearheaded grasp rural Berbers have of their position in the global economy, and the institutional organization of households as a way of dealing with such a position, are key to making sense of child labor, and making ironic sense of it as somehow “hopeful.”

Crucially, girls slaving away for long hours and little money are working for someone else, not themselves. Sometimes, of course, these working children are evidence of a breakdown in social solidarity, the kind of anomie Durkheim feared. Some girls are indeed exploited by
people who have no interest in the girl, and in whom the girl has no interest. One urban woman who claims to have hired over a hundred rural girls says explicitly of the parents, “They are not so poor, these people have lost their sense of family solidarity” (Sommerfelt 2001:48, emphasis original). Clearly this woman sees the child labor problem as greedy parents who disregard intimacy or even responsibility for economic opportunity.

Surely this is the case for too many girls, there are too many who have suffered a “loss of solidarity,” though it seems that the evidence suggests these are typically orphans or others whose kin networks have frayed or dissolved. The middle class employer’s understanding of “solidarity” focuses on parents providing for children; in the mountains family solidarity involves children providing for parents. All of the children I know from Tadrar who work in the city are working there precisely because powerful forms of social solidarity remain intact. In other words, working children can be a product of a breakdown of solidarity, but they can just as well be working because of an intense loyalty to others, loyalty to forms of solidarity like the patriarchal household. The latter case, it seems to me, is the kind of “solidarity” we can hope for in the contemporary Maghreb, and it suggests we rethink the “romance of community” from something outside and opposing Capital to something integral to it. Following Miranda Joseph (Joseph 2002), scholars might profitably ask why we believe solidarity to be necessarily a good thing, and exactly what kinds of solidarity are worth admiring?

In broader economic terms, it is rural households produce the bodies that provide the cheap labor that keeps the urban Moroccan economy operating. Rural households are able to accomplish this because they do still operate within communities –households care for their members, exchange labor with other households, organize themselves into lineages and villages, and in general succeed in maintaining their constituents in very marginal environments using very few resources by coordinating vast amounts of labor. The woman cited above who has hired rural girls as maids might read the sending of girls to work in terms of parents “not caring,” but what parents care about is much larger than individual children. Individualism is not a human universal but a middle class luxury, one that is itself dependent on low wage and no wage labor, often provided by women and children, labor that is in Morocco produced through rural households. Our (non-village) wealth depends on poverty, in other words, and our relative wealth protects us from needing the kinds of solidarity employed by the world’s poor, in this case loyalty to the patriarchal household. Even as we sit formulating ways to lessen or end poverty, and thus lessen or end child labor, we sit because someone else is not sitting, someone else is “rushing from morning to night,” as noted by Rqia in the interview above. It is not just rural patriarchs who benefit from the labor of children.

Our discomfort with working children is an artifact of our discomfort with the increasingly polarized nature of our contemporary world economy. This is notable, for instance, when a work day beginning before dawn and ending near midnight is thought to be abnormal, or when “dropping out of school” or “toiling in the fields” are facts left hanging in a government report as so obviously horrendous as to require no comment. I want to make clear that I am absolutely in favor of children receiving an education and on principle I am opposed to “toil,” but I also want to make clear that these framings of the nightmare of child wage labor evince a total ignorance of rural conditions and the contemporary rural economy. To “drop out of school” one would have to go to school (and many rural children do not), for school to be beneficial it would have to pay off in some way (and it often does not), to have a discrete “working day” requires some distinction between work life and home life (there is none for rural girls), and “toiling” in
the fields is what all rural boys do all their lives, day in and day out. Everyone agrees rural life is “hard” (ishqa), but that does not mean it is miserable, does not mean it is abusive.

The fact that rural Berber children working in the city submit to an inhuman economy for the benefit of others can be read as something like Durkheim’s “altruistic suicide,” the particular malady of the suffocating conscience collectif of the rural household. As such, the sacrifices of rural children are a sign of solidarity—one that ironically withstands, but also facilitates, the socially tumultuous influence of “opportunity” and economic “growth.” Berber households--now sustained through wage labor of every imaginable kind--continue to form the bedrock of thriving, or at least surviving, rural communities. Berber children remain loyal to social modalities geared to the long-term, terminal trajectory of human life. This suggests far more foresight than we can credit to most contemporary states (Robertson 1984, Scott 1998), and would seem a wise use of boring, numbly anonymous, short term wage labor relationships. Household solidarity allows for some hope that at the end of long lives of unremitting labor one can rest and die among family, in relative comfort. Whether this is hopeful solidarity, or simply the best that can be hoped for, remains a troubling, and still open, question.

1 I take the first part of this title from Homi Bhabha (1994:xxv). I should acknowledge many incisive comments I have received on earlier drafts of this paper from members of the colloquium organized at Harvard University by Katherine Hoffman and Susan Gilson Miller. I am particularly indebted to Susan Sloyomovics and Hillary Haldane.

2 See Hoffman’s entry in the Human Reference Area Files at http://ets.udl.umich.edu/cgi/e/ehraf/ehraf-idx?q1=Marruecos;rgn=paragraphs;owe=MW11;type=boolean;c=ehrafe;view=doc;start=1;size=25;subview=ocm;id=MW11-004;section=section1;sectbyte=246186421.

3 For a critical understanding of the term “globalization” see Trouillot (2001:128). I do not mean a “world without boundaries” but a world where new sorts of connections are impacting rural Moroccan life in new ways. Primarily, here, we are talking about circular migration for low paid wage labor.

4 See Lahlou (http://www.araburban.org/childcity/Papers/English/Lahlou%20Morocco.pdf) page 6.


8 (ibid. 3)

9 See Lahlou (http://www.araburban.org/childcity/Papers/English/Lahlou%20Morocco.pdf). In the related report Lahlou writes that what labor laws exist in Morocco are not adhered to and do not give strong protection (in Sommerfelt 2001:78).

10 This report is available at http://www.araburban.org/childcity/Papers/English/Lahlou%20Morocco.pdf. In it the author is listed as being in the “Ministry of Planning,” presumably of Morocco, but this clearly is also much of the basis for the Sommerfelt report (2001) for “Save the Children.”

11 See Guessous (2002). The statistical dimensions of rural children’s urban labor remains poorly understood, and even basic causes of the phenomenon need more sociological research. Here I rely on anecdotal evidence, interviews in one particular village, and government statistics. Further research is in progress.


13 All names herein are pseudonyms.

14 Translations of these taped interviews were done by Latifa Asseffar, who I thank for this as well as her insightful commentaries on all things Ashelhi.

15 A USAID report entitled “Morocco Workforce Development Assessment,” a study also intended to assess the impact of the now-completed free trade agreement between the US and Morocco, mentions child labor exactly once. It seems a “professional training official” interviewed for the report refuses to take children in his program because he “will be accused of encouraging child labor” (2003:25). Beyond this we read nothing about the topic. Child
labor evidently did not fit any of their sub-headings, including sections on “Analysis of Morocco’s Skills and Labor Markets,” “Analysis of Morocco’s Education and Training System,” and a “USAID / Morocco Workforce Development Strategy.”

Work on homelessness in the United States suggests that a breakdown of kin networks is universally a precursor to social ills like homelessness (in New York City) or the “petites bonnes” phenomena in Morocco. See Hopper (2002).

Rosenberger (2001) and Michel (1997) give some idea exactly how precarious the rural economy is and has been, at least since the 19th century. Along with Mojuetan (1995) Rosenberger (2001:9) discusses the intersecting trajectories of Morocco and Europe, with the former sliding into penury while the latter rose to become economically dominant.

Bibliography


