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Depoliticising Poor Water Quality: Ambiguous Agreement in a Wastewater Reuse Project in Morocco

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ABSTRACT: How are depoliticising discourses on water issues produced and rendered effective? Research on discursive depoliticisation has focused on the ability of different types of policy networks to generate powerful and reasonably coherent depoliticised narratives. In the paper, by tracing the depoliticisation of poor water quality in a wastewater reuse project in Marrakesh, Morocco, we suggest that depoliticised discourses can also be produced in a much more dispersed, less coordinated way. In the case analysed here, depoliticisation occurred through an 'ambiguous agreement' around a highly polysemic idea, that of innovation. All the key actors understood that the project was innovative but that water quality was not a significant part of the innovation. This encouraged each actor to frame poor water quality as a strictly private matter that the golf courses needed to tackle on their own; however, each actor also had their own, idiosyncratic interpretation of exactly what this innovation was about and why poor water quality was in the end not that important. Showing how depoliticisation can be the product of mechanisms with varying degrees of coordination helps account for the ubiquity of the phenomenon.

KEYWORDS: Depoliticisation, discourse, wastewater reuse, polysemy, ambiguous agreement, Morocco

INTRODUCTION

When water supplied for a specific purpose is clearly unfit for that purpose, how can its poor quality remain undebated? How can the gap between the official objectives of a water delivery project and the visible evidence of poor implementation on the ground not end up being the subject of political controversies and some collective efforts at problem-solving? A large-scale wastewater reuse project in Marrakesh, Morocco, offers an interesting opportunity to explore the causes of, and mechanisms behind, water depoliticisation. Remarkably, in this particular case what appears to be depoliticised is the poor quality of the water being used by golf courses. The water is what experts call 'reclaimed' or 'reused', in that it comes directly from the Marrakesh wastewater treatment plant after passing through about 80 kilometres of pipes. At its destination, however, in contrast to the carefully crafted image of orderliness and cleanliness associated with golf courses, the artificial ponds and lakes are covered by a proliferation of green algae. Experts agree that the algal blooms are caused by a high concentration of nitrogen, a nutrient that is widely found in wastewater due to insufficient removal by the water treatment plant (Kahim and Idabdellah, 2013);[1] these algae, or cyanobacteria, in turn release foul-smelling gases such as hydrogen sulphide and ammonia. The result is a quality of water that most greenkeepers privately

[1] Interview with an international expert on wastewater, Marrakesh, 14 April 2016.

describe as "a real nightmare";[2] the colour is "disgusting (…) and sometimes makes you wonder what colour it really is. It turns black, then yellow, and then strangely, when the water level drops slightly, you can see blocks of salt".[3] Many greenkeepers say they are tired of dealing with clients who complain that the golf courses "smell".[4]

Nevertheless, both state representatives and the engineers employed by the local public utility company insist that the problem is strictly private. Greenkeepers, they say, simply need to tackle the water problem themselves; they need to pay more attention, for example, by oxygenating their ponds or by planting reeds to remove unwelcomed nutrients. The greenkeepers' own managers – the real estate developers who own the golf courses – appear to share this perception, and ask their staff to find their own solutions to the problem. As a result, poor water quality has not emerged as a public issue that would put the spotlight on state agencies and public policies; in fact, water quality is entirely absent from the local policy agenda. The process appears, therefore, to be a standard case of what Hay (2007) calls type-2 depoliticisation, that is, the framing of an issue as strictly private, thereby preventing it from entering 'societal' or 'governmental' domains.

More fundamentally, in their classic study, Buller and Flinders (2005) distinguish three categories of depoliticisation: institutional, rule-based, and 'preference-shaping'. The first two, as we will see, do not apply in our case; there has been no institutional delegation of decisions to technocratic bodies, nor have strict rules been created that limit government responsibility. The type-2 depoliticisation we observe in Marrakesh is clearly of the preference-shaping variety; it is a "recourse to ideological, discursive or rhetorical claims in order to justify a political position that a certain issue or function does, or should, lie beyond the scope of politics or the capacity for State control" (Flinders and Buller, 2006: 307). How, then, did this discursive depoliticisation come about and how has it been rendered effective?

This article begins with the observation that political scientists have most often focused on coordinated modes of depoliticisation, that is, depoliticisation resulting from the concerted activity of multiple actors capable of jointly devising their discursive strategies. These actors may vary in number and profile, ranging from small government groups and state managers (Ingram and Schneider, 1993; Burnham, 2014: 189) to broader "epistemic communities" and "discourse coalitions" (Flinders and Buller, 2006: 295-296; Hajer, 1995). The point has been clearly made in the discursive institutionalist literature, however, that any "communicative discourse" between policy actors and the public must be founded beforehand on a "coordinated discourse" among policy actors that is constructed in specific policy arenas and over time (Schmidt, 2008, 2015). In conjunction, these coalitions or networks give coherence to an initially eclectic set of policy positions, transforming them into relatively coherent and powerful causal stories, story lines or policy statements (Stone, 1989; Zittoun, 2009; Wood, 2015a). In short, depoliticising discourses are deemed to be the product of coordinated action and to be reasonably consistent; as a result, they have the potential to produce cultural hegemony, that is to say, they can shape the perceptions and common sense of the public at large (Buizer and Kurz, 2016; De Nardis, 2017: 344).

This hypothesis, however, has been more of an assumption than an object of empirical inquiry. In other words, just how many depoliticising discourses are in fact coordinated and internally consistent has not been defined as a central question – a question whose answer may actually vary a great deal from one issue or one political setting to the next. It is the assumed coordination and internal consistency of depoliticising discourses that we examine here. Specifically, to what extent has the depoliticisation of the quality of reclaimed water in Marrakesh been the product of a coordinated and coherent endeavour? And, if the answer proves to be 'hardly at all', then how does uncoordinated (or very loosely coordinated) depoliticisation work?

[2] Interview with a greenkeeper, 4 March 2016.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Interview with a greenkeeper, 22 March 2016.

In this context, the case of water reuse in Marrakesh is interesting, not only because of its empirical pungency but also because it may be a typical case of a highly – and vertically – coordinated depoliticisation. The Moroccan state appears to possess all the resources required to disseminate a hegemonic discourse and then marginalise dissenting voices. Through its tight control of the means of communication and the symbolic authority of the monarchy, it is in a particularly good position to control the publicly accepted discourse around water reuse and to define what pertains to 'public' and 'private' domains. Furthermore, thanks to its security apparatus and its control over economic activity, the monarch is well placed to either oblige or co-opt would-be complainers, in that way keeping their grievances strictly out of the public sphere (Vermeren, 2009; Vairel, 2014). In short, Moroccan state elites have a well-established capacity to define and maintain 'red lines', that is, to determine which matters are said to lie beyond the domain of legitimate political discussion and should therefore under no circumstances be politicised (Tozy, 1991; Roussillon and Ferrié, 2005; Saghi, 2018).

We will show, however, that even in this seemingly typical case of vertically controlled depoliticisation, the suppression of the political has in fact been more dispersed than coordinated. More specifically, we argue that this dispersed depoliticisation has taken place through what Palier (2005) and Jenson (2010) call "ambiguous agreement", that is, with the active support of "a range of different groups (…) for different reasons and with different interests" (Palier, 2005: 131). There has been no concerted effort and no unifying vision as to why water quality must remain a strictly private matter to be handled by the greenkeepers themselves; instead, there has only been vague agreement around the idea that the project was 'innovative' and that water quality was not a defining part of this innovation. Behind the very "polysemic idea" of innovation (Béland and Cox, 2015), therefore, different actors were happy to neutralise the issue of water quality for different reasons. If no one found it worthwhile to put the issue on the agenda, it was not because there was clear agreement on a (strictly private) interpretation of the issue, but rather because each and every actor understood, for their own reasons, that the issue of water quality was secondary and best defined as a strictly private matter. In short, the depoliticisation of water quality was less the product of a coordinated strategy led by state elites than a by-product of a disparate constellation of interests. If it could be replicated in other settings, this finding would lead to a better understanding of depoliticisation as a far-reaching social phenomenon; if depoliticisation could be produced through a variety of (more or less coordinated) mechanisms, it would help account for the observed ubiquity of the phenomenon (Wood, 2015a).

The rest of the article is organised into four sections. First, we present our theoretical framework, including how we define and operationalise the key notions of depoliticisation and ambiguous agreement. Second, we show that the state elites always considered that the 'innovative' project was about providing quantity, not quality; their objective was to be able to claim that golf courses would no longer be competing for scarce water with other essential (urban and agricultural) uses, and that from now on they would exploit urban wastewater, a newly created, previously untapped resource. Third, we show that the local public water utility engineers looked on the high-tech treatment plant itself as the innovation, and had little regard for the end-of-pipe fitness of the water. Fourth, we explain how the real estate developers who own the golf courses considered the 'innovation' to be the public-private partnership that allowed them to appropriate highly coveted public lands while maintaining their good standing with the monarchy. We conclude with a more general reflection on the implications of dispersed, as compared to more coordinated, processes of depoliticisation.

DISPERSED DEPOLITICISATION DUE TO AN AMBIGUOUS AGREEMENT: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to clearly delimit the depoliticising process, we will first explain some preliminary working definitions of 'politics' and 'depoliticisation'. Colin Hay (2007: 87) defines politics as the "capacity for contingency and deliberation in situations of genuine collective and social choice". According to Hay, issues move between a dominant discourse based on fate and necessity in which nothing can be done

(depoliticisation), and one of deliberation and contingency where action and change are deemed possible (politicisation). For our purposes, this broad definition has three advantages. First, it emphasises the discursive dimension of depoliticisation, paying attention to fluid discursive manoeuvres or 'speech acts' deployed by a range of possible actors (Bates et al., 2014; Jenkins, 2011); this is one of the key reasons why by a number of scholars have applied it (Beveridge and Koch, 2017) or adapted it (Jenkins, 2011; Kuzemko, 2014). Second, the "capacity for agency and deliberation" is a definition that is large enough to cover a continuum of political interactions ranging from relatively peaceful social learning to competition between different political interests; as such, it echoes Heclo's much-quoted formulation, according to which "politics finds its sources not only in power but also in uncertainty" whereby individuals are "collectively wondering what to do" (Heclo, 1974: 305). Depoliticisation, then, not only refers to the suppression of political conflicts and controversies, but, more broadly, to the suppression of the very idea that there are social choices to be made. Third and finally, the definition is agnostic about the level of coordination by which depoliticisation is achieved. Rather than a necessarily concerted strategy, it is depicted more open-endedly as a process that "either removes or displaces the potential for choice, collective agency, and deliberation" (Hay, 2007: 86; see also Fawcett et al., 2017: 7).

Among the various definitions, we focus on what Hay (2007) calls type-2 depoliticisation, which Flinders and Wood (2014) call "societal depoliticisation". This refers to the 'privatisation' of issues, not formally but in terms of their salience as topics of public debate. Through societal depoliticisation, issues are framed as being the domain of private responsibility and, as such, are prevented from being publicly discussed and debated. We do not, however, agree with Flinders and Wood in their classification of 'discursive depoliticisation' as being in a separate category from societal depoliticisation, as if the two were on a par conceptually. In our opinion, such a distinction confuses sites of depoliticisation – that is, movements between the governmental, societal and private spheres – and modes of depoliticisation, which may be either organisational, rule-based or discursive. In our view, modes of depoliticisation can be employed in any site; they are orthogonal to them. Through discursive practices of depoliticisation, then, actors "rhetorically deny their capacity to alter their collective practices, institutions and social conditions" (Wood, 2015a: 10). This allows the actors to shift an issue either from the governmental domain to the societal, or from the societal domain to the private, or even directly from the first to the third domain. We are interested here in discursive modes of depoliticisation that shift issues from the societal to the private sphere.

But what are the mechanisms of discursive depoliticisation? Many scholars who work (explicitly or implicitly) in the framework presented above highlight the coordinated character of the process. To be sure, discursive depoliticisation can be led by a range of different actors and can involve substantial differences; state managers, for example, may offer complex, technical explanations for policy designs (Burnham, 2014: 189) while politicians may claim that a given issue is beyond their reach and should not be the subject of political intervention (Kettell, 2008; Rodgers, 2009). Discursive depoliticisation might also be produced by expert communities disseminating neoliberal modes of thinking (Flinders and Buller, 2006; Flinders and Wood, 2014) or by a broader 'discourse coalition' (Hajer, 2005: 450); whatever the case, the point is that there must be some identifiable 'discursive communities' at work (Schmidt, 2015: 180). A discursive community is made up of various actors involved in the policy process; they may be policymakers or government officials, policy consultants, experts, lobbyists, business or union leaders, who engage in a 'coordinative' discourse by "creating, deliberating, arguing, bargaining, and reaching agreement on policies" (Schmidt, 2015: 181; see also Schmidt, 2008). These communities are organised and the individuals within them interact densely and frequently; as a result, they produce powerful story lines and "policy statements" (Zittoun, 2009) that encapsulate and provide coherence to an initially eclectic set of policy positions. They have the potential to shape public preferences and cause them to converge into a single unifying paradigm or frame (Flinders and Buller, 2006). At this point, the 'coordinative' discourse becomes a 'communicative' one, "through which key policy actors seek to persuade the general public (…) that the policies (…) are necessary (…) and appropriate" (Schmidt, 2002:

171-172). This communicative discourse has the potential to produce cultural hegemony (De Nardis, 2017: 344).

Although discursive communities in water policy have rarely been the subject of systematic sociological inquiry, they have often been shown to be at work and, indeed, to be quite effective. Many scholars, for example, have highlighted how groups of policymakers have, by touting the potential of large infrastructure projects, sought to transform social perceptions of water scarcity into perceptions of water abundance, thereby easing political tensions over resource allocation (Swearingen, 1987; Meital, 2000; Swyngedouw, 2015; Hess et al., 2016). Using this perspective, Swyngedouw and Williams (2016: 61) analyse how "desalination is presented as a win – win high-tech, modern and environmentally friendly solution that 'frees up' water for environmental preservation and satisfies the escalating demands of developers and irrigators"; as such, "it has become the subject of an extraordinary consensus (…) that diffuses political tension through techno-managerial projects and constitutes a form of political disavowal" (ibid: 56, 62). In much the same vein, Folch (2019) shows how, in Paraguay, the Itaipú Dam was harnessed by General Stroessner and his inner circle to build a consensual promise of modernisation through industrialisation, thereby depoliticising development as well as the use of the dam's royalties. Folch, in this, echoes the work of Venot (2017), who shows how drip irrigation became the material embodiment of a broad agricultural development discourse that stresses the need for "more crop per drop". This discourse combines calls for intensifying agriculture with the need to preserve natural resources and adapt to climate change (Venot, 2017: 10); it fuses various positions into an elegantly simple story line that has proved capable of evolving over time.

The point of this article is not to question these empirical findings – which we have no reason to doubt – but to point out that there may be other modes of discursive depoliticisation that are far less coordinated and organised. In such cases, polysemic ideas differ from story lines in that they "aggregate different – and even contradictory – interests, based on different, and sometimes contrasting, interpretations of the consequences of implementing a certain course of action" (Palier, 2005: 138; see also Maron and Shalev, 2017: 115-116). The idea of social investment, for example, attracted constituencies as diverse as pro-market economists and left-leaning social policy advocates (Jenson, 2010); concepts such as sustainability, social inclusion and global governance display similar dynamics (Béland and Cox, 2015). As Béland and Cox (ibid: 5) emphasise, ambiguous ideas are productive because "ideas help actors define their interests, and broader – and vaguer – ideas are more likely to appeal to a greater number of constituencies that have heterogeneous preferences". Innovation is just such an idea, a "floating signifier" (Hofferberth, 2015) that lends itself to very different meanings and interpretations.

Much in the same way as do other types of depoliticising discourses, however, ambiguous agreements aggregate and include different actors but also exclude peripheral voices that might seek to re-politicise the issue. We will see how this ambivalence works in the case of the wastewater reuse project in Marrakesh, Morocco; there, the remarkably polysemic idea of 'innovation' helped assemble a loosely coordinated coalition while marginalising dissenting voices (those of the greenkeepers) and silencing the dissonant issue they wished to politicise, that of poor water quality. Figure 1 summarises the main points of contrast between coordinated and dispersed modes of discursive depoliticisation. Importantly, we do not view real-world processes as falling neatly into either of these two categories; rather, they will be located on a continuum ranging from more dispersed to more coordinated modes of depoliticisation.

Methodologically, determining whether a given process of depoliticisation has been more or less coordinated requires careful tracing of the entire process (that is, the intervening steps) by which actors' prior preferences and interests ultimately led to the depoliticisation of the issue of interest.

Figure 1. Two contrasting modes of discursive depoliticisation.

	Dispersed depoliticization ←	→ Coordinated depoliticization
Key actors	Loose constellation of state and non-state actors	State managers, epistemic communities, discourse coalitions, etc.
Discursive mechanism	Polysemic idea	Coordinative and communicative discourses (e.g. narratives, story lines, policy statements, etc.)
Form of depoliticization	Ambiguous agreement	Cultural hegemony

Source: Authors

METHODOLOGY

This investigation started with the observation of a puzzling phenomenon: the lack of any collective interest or public debate around the arrival of piped water which was clearly unfit for its purpose and had been costly to produce. We were led to question the extent to which this depoliticisation was the product of a concerted strategy. Our starting point, in other words, was not a fully specified causal mechanism, even if we knew that we wanted to contribute to the theory of depoliticisation; rather, our process tracing was of a more inductive, or 'theory-building', kind. (For a full review of types of process tracing, see Trampush and Palier, 2016). According to Beach and Pedersen (2013: 16) "theory-building process tracing starts with empirical material and uses a structured analysis of this material to detect a plausible hypothetical causal mechanism"; in this process, some antecedent conditions (Xs) are linked with Y (what they call 'Y-centric theory building'). This "inductive observation of apparent causal mechanisms and heuristic rendering of these mechanisms" in turn generates "potential hypotheses for future testing" (George and Bennett, 2005: 5).

We therefore started with observations and the historical record; we then explored whether the evidence allowed for the identification of intervening variables, causal mechanisms or causal chains. In so doing, we largely proceeded backwards from our final outcome (depoliticisation) to plausible causal mechanisms; from there we looked for antecedent conditions (actors' preferences and interests at the beginning of the project) that may have given rise to the causal mechanisms in the first place. In other words, our approach "traced backward the causal process that produces the case outcome, at each stage inferring from the context what caused each cause" (van Evera, 1997: 70).

In a second analytical step, which followed the recommendations of Ruzzene (2014: 73); we verified that our causal chain was continuous and complete, that is, that every link in the chain was indeed backed up by the mechanism at work. Thus, we verified that every actor's preferences and interests had led them to an understanding that the project was in some sense innovative. We then assessed whether these understandings were sufficiently heterogeneous to warrant the notion that the agreement was ambiguous. We also sought all possible confirmation that every understanding downplayed the issue of water quality. Finally, we examined whether the ambiguous agreement was sufficiently robust to resist various attempts at re-politicisation.

In short, as with any process tracing methodology, we sought to "make within-case inferences about the presence/absence of a causal mechanism in a single case study" and to "investigate its workings" (Beach and Pedersen, 2013: 4-5). We thereby followed a growing consensus that detailed process tracing provides significant benefits in terms of operationalising the notion of depoliticisation by concretely examining its mechanisms and political effects, thereby either generating new hypotheses or testing existing ones (see Kettell, 2008; Wood, 2015b).

The pieces of diagnostic evidence that we gathered were based on five months of fieldwork conducted between February and July 2016 by the first author. In order to understand how the project related to their political or professional preferences, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals employed by the local water utility, Régie Autonome de Distribution d'Eau et d'Electricité de Marrakech (RADEEMA)[5], as well as with regional authorities, golf course managers and greenkeepers. Additional interviews were conducted with staff at the Water Department in Rabat, the institution that designs all of Morocco's water policy with the exception of that concerning the agricultural sector. In order to both help us trace the emergence of the project and to confirm that no collective attempt at problem-solving was taking place, interviews were carried out with water scientists at the Cadi Ayyad University in Marrakesh. Like the other interviews, these were mostly conducted in Darija, the Moroccan dialect of Arabic. The first author was also allowed to sit in, as a non-participating observer, on several meetings between golf managers and RADEEMA. This ethnographic fieldwork was complemented by extensive documentary research on the water reuse project (financial studies, technical presentations, management agreements between RADEEMA and the golf courses) and a review of the discourses and press releases concerning the project.

This inductive process tracing eventually allowed us to understand how state elites, local public utility engineers and real estate developers set out to 'privatise' the issue of water quality for quite different reasons and with quite different interests in mind.

INNOVATING TO INVISIBILISE WATER SCARCITY: STATE ELITES AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE REUSE PROJECT

Golf resorts have long been an integral part of the image of Marrakesh. The first resort, the Royal Golf of Marrakech, opened in 1927 during the French Protectorate. Like other resorts in Morocco, it was an instrumental part of the kingdom's diplomatic strategy; prominent international personalities were invited there (including Winston Churchill, Dwight D. Eisenhower and David Lloyd George) who in the course of their visits established close personal connections with the kingdom (Peraldi, 2018: 171). A favourite sport of King Hassan II (1961-1999), playing golf was intimately linked with the monarch's style of governance; it was used to show who among the monarch's entourage was – even if temporarily – in good standing and who was not, as "decisions were routinely made just before the king would hit the ball" (Lyazghi, 2017: 297). This ongoing political use of the game helped consolidate a lasting symbolic association between golf and the Makhzen, the monarchy's network of patronage and control; an immediate and strong political valence was thus given to even the mildest criticisms of the activity. In subsequent decades, the politicisation of building golf resorts only increased, and addressing this concern would become a top priority of state elites.

Controversies over the 'golf city' in a water-scarce environment

In 2001, a massive programme to build new tourist resorts throughout the country was announced by the new king, Mohammed VI. In a public speech made in Marrakesh, the monarch himself launched Vision

[5] RADEEMA was created as a public utility in 1971. For a long time, it limited its activities to supplying the city of Marrakesh with electricity and drinking water, before extending its prerogatives to sanitation in 1998. As a state-owned utility, RADEEMA is under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior, represented by the Wilaya (regional prefecture) of Marrakesh.

2010, a plan whose ambition was to increase the number of tourists to Morocco from 4.4 million in 2001 to 10 million by 2010.[6] Concerning the city of Marrakesh, the plan aimed to attract a diverse range of tourists to a world class destination, from lower middle class Europeans lured by new low-cost airline companies to a decidedly more upscale clientele. Luxury real estate projects built around golf resorts were presented as a key component of attracting the latter group. The aim was to transform the regional capital into a "golf city par excellence".[7] Far from fostering a political consensus, however, the 'vision' triggered intense controversies centred on its negative impacts on scarce water resources. Water-intensive tourism became a contentious issue throughout the following decade.

From the beginning there was harsh criticism of the direct threat posed by golf resorts to the supply of water needed for ancient palm groves, which are an 'endangered heritage' of the city and much treasured by the population. The subject was all the more sensitive because in the preceding 20 years the total area covered by palm trees had already receded by 30% under the twin pressures of water stress and creeping urbanisation (El Faïz, 2002). Golf resorts were also blamed for the additional pressure they put on water resources for agriculture in the region, even though the actual total irrigated area had doubled in the 1990s and 2000s (Econostrum, 2012). In 2007, conflicts intensified between the golf industry and those calling urgently for water preservation. On the one hand, regional tourism authorities announced that they were officially aiming at creating 30 new golf resorts by 2030, including 15 by 2015; this would have required at least 45 million cubic metres (Mm^3) in additional water withdrawals, about two-thirds of the total amount delivered to the city at that time (Agence du Bassin Hydraulique du Haouz Tensift, 2011). On the other hand, the master plan for the catchment area, as elaborated by the River Basin Agency,[8] forecast an overall water deficit for the catchment area of 233 Mm^3 by the same year, 2030. Worse still, the plan described an alarming situation with no obvious way out, a projected 20% reduction in average rainfall due to climate change in the following years. It also estimated that the construction of new dams would come at major economic cost. As a result, criticisms, either veiled or open, multiplied in the local media, often fed by local water scientists from the prestigious Cadi Ayyad University. They targeted the "irrational multiplication" of golf resorts, which was labelled a "crime" by one prominent hydrogeologist (Yabiladi, 2011). The whole rationale behind the development of the tourism industry was questioned, as the "worrisome water scarcity appears all the more so in a context where all eyes are set on the 2010 deadline and the 10 million tourist objective" (Maghress, 2007). It is in this politicised context that the water reuse innovation was launched; it marked a clear effort by state elites to appease those concerned about the issue and to depoliticise the contested issue of water-thirsty golf resorts around Marrakesh. Ensuring the end-of-pipe quality of the reused water was at no point a key concern.

A project to solve the water problem in Marrakesh

On 29 December 2011, His Majesty Mohammed VI inaugurated the new wastewater treatment plant in Marrakesh. The accompanying leaflet issued by the local public water utility company, RADEEMA, underlined the fact that the plant was using "some of the most sophisticated technologies worldwide". For a cost of 1.23 billion Moroccan dirhams (MAD) (US$121 million), 22% of which was financed by the real estate developers who owned the golf courses, many features of the project were indeed technologically unprecedented. It included an additional 'tertiary' treatment process to make urban wastewater fit for surface irrigation as the water would come into direct contact with the general public

[6] This strategy was later followed by Vision 2020, which aimed to increase tourists from 1.9 million in 2010 to 3.7 million in 2020.

[7] This is an excerpt from a press release handed to us by the Regional Council of Tourism.

[8] River basin agencies were established in Morocco for each of the nine river basins of the country by the 1995 Water Law. They are semi-autonomous public agencies with legal personality and financial autonomy and are placed under the trusteeship of the Water Department. They have a wide range of formal powers that include developing and implementing River basin masterplans that define objectives and investment programs; authorizing abstractions and discharges and maintaining a public register; and monitoring water quality and quantity for both surface and groundwater.

(on grass and in ponds and lakes). It also included 80 km of pipes with five pumping stations to connect the wastewater treatment plant to the golf resorts.

Since 2011, treated wastewater has been systematically presented as a new, previously untapped resource that could sustainably reconcile previously competing interests. As summarised by a national newspaper, the project had "definitively solved the water problem for irrigation and tourism in the region" (L'Economiste, 2009). A news outlet heralded the innovation as a "precursor project that secured the water needs for the economic development of the city" (Medias 24, 2016). Still more enthusiastically, another asserted that RADEEMA was "resuscitating" water, allowing the productive use of an until-now "unexploited treasure" (Tel Quel, 2016). Golf course managers themselves agreed that the project was fundamentally about enhancing their social legitimacy. "[I]n theory, this a good project for us because people say, 'For goodness sake, there are already too many golf courses in Marrakesh, you are taking all our water'. Now we can say, 'No, you're wrong there, we're taking your (…) dirty water, not clean water from the spigot'".[9]

This framing, however, obscured the real water reallocation that was underway. In fact, the water was not a new, previously untapped resource; quite the reverse in that the regional river basin is 'closed' in that all regular water flows are already being exploited for human use (Tanouti and Molle, 2013). Before the treatment plant was built, the untreated wastewater served to maintain the palm tree wetlands and the Tensift river downstream; the water was then tapped by a traditional irrigation system that irrigated almost 2000 hectares of fruit trees, particularly olive trees (ibid, 2013). In other words, water was merely being shifted from downstream users to golf resorts, meaning that, for state elites, the reuse project served to invisibilise the issue of water scarcity.

Resorting to a large infrastructure project to defuse political tensions is a well-established mode of 'technopolitics' in Morocco (Cantoni and Rignall, 2019; see also: Zemni and Koenraad, 2011); these projects are often accompanied by impressive statistics. In the Marrakesh water reuse project, the priority of defusing political tensions made state authorities particularly unwilling to listen to the greenkeepers' grievances over water quality, which were, in their opinion, negligible in comparison with the benefits of water allocation. When we raised the problem of water quality with the wali (the governor who is appointed by the king and represents him at the regional level) we were simply informed that "treated wastewater is analysed and its quality complies with national standards, so there are no problems in that respect, as the analyses have shown".[10] When we inquired about the analyses, the reply denied any possibility of a controversy. We were told that, "We do not ask RADEEMA for the results of the analyses, because RADEEMA works for the Wilaya, so it would not make sense for the Wilaya to ask itself for something! They do their job correctly and we do not ask them to give us the results of the analyses".[11] We raised the same issue at the Regional Investment Center (CRI), a public entity headed by the wali, which was created in 2002 to coordinate public action vis-à-vis national and foreign investors. There we were simply informed that treated wastewater is analysed and that its quality complied with national standards so there was no problem. An official from the CRI similarly informed a greenkeeper that "you don't always have to focus on problems. Quite the contrary, you need to emphasise that everyone is connected and so nobody is using the aquifer any longer".[12]

COP 22, the world conference on climate change, was held in Marrakesh in November 2016. In its aftermath, it was even clearer that water quality would continue to be ignored. Before the conference, many international delegations were expected to visit the wastewater treatment plant. With the

[9] Interview with a greenkeeper, Marrakesh, 14 March 2016.

[10] Interview with an official at the Marrakesh-Safi Wilaya, Marrakesh, 11 April 2016.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Reported by a greenkeeper, Marrakesh, 14 March 2016.

conference in the offing, and as greenkeepers continued to complain, a few months before the conference the wali hurriedly convened a meeting between them and RADEEMA. He urged the two sides to find common ground and, for the first time, put some pressure on RADEEMA to come up with some solutions for its clients. According to several participants, the wali looked genuinely concerned that the golf courses would take advantage of the international presence to voice their frustration and shatter the consensual public discourse surrounding the project. As soon as the conference ended, however, greenkeepers' access to the wali was cut off;[13] no follow-up meeting was ever held, and no further pressure was applied on RADEEMA, leaving greenkeepers locked in their bilateral relationship with the water utility. No real debate was ever to emerge from these interactions as most water engineers interpreted the project as a high-tech treatment project, making them just as happy to shift the responsibility for good quality water onto the greenkeepers' shoulders.

THE ENGINEERS' INNOVATION: A STATE-OF-THE ART WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANT

Wastewater collection and treatment is a recent professional field in Morocco. As in many developing countries, sanitation only appeared on the institutional agenda at the beginning of the 21st century when a universal supply of drinking water was within reach;[14] thereafter, everything changed rapidly and a National Sanitation Plan was launched in 2005. The plan aimed to generalise wastewater treatment by 2030 through the massive construction (and rehabilitation) of some 330 wastewater treatment plants throughout the country. In Marrakesh, the reuse innovation was launched when the standard, secondary sanitation plant itself had only just started to operate; moreover, it was launched at the urging of the king (via his local representative, the wali), not by sanitation engineers themselves. Not having been consulted in the first place, the latter re-interpreted the innovation as primarily concerning the wastewater treatment plant. and mostly met golf course managers' complaints about water quality with indifference and/or irritation. Interpreting the project as being exclusively about the wastewater treatment plant was all the more attractive because it was also highly gratifying professionally.

A prestigious high-tech sanitation project for Marrakesh engineers

Marrakesh's sanitation engineers were being required to service a city of more than a million inhabitants, a city whose wastewater was heavily polluted with effluent from the many industries that neglected to install water treatment features (Tanouti and Molle, 2013). It is easy to see why, no matter how innovative the water reuse project, they would feel more committed to the enormous task of supplying the city with clean water than to servicing a handful of golf resorts frequented by a few wealthy foreigners, especially when the latter task would require a comparable amount of professional interest and attention. Beyond this obvious practical reason for focusing on the plant rather than on the quality of the water delivered to the golf course, however, lay a more gratifying one: the plant represented a technological leap forward for Morocco that directly enhanced the social prestige of its operators.

Traditionally, the preferred process for wastewater treatment in Morocco has been natural ponds, a technology that is appreciated for its simplicity as it relies almost entirely on biological processes and requires limited human resources for maintenance. It has two serious limitations, however, namely the need for large areas of land and the difficulty of adequately dealing with industrial pollution. In Marrakesh, the compact plant with activated sludge was intended to overcome these limitations. As one

[13] Interview with a greenkeeper, 22 March 2016, 6 March 2016.

[14] The Moroccan population increased from around 12 million inhabitants in 1961 to 30 million in 2002. Challengingly, the development of water infrastructure had to face both rapidly expanding cities and a significant permanent population in the countryside; at the turn of the century, rural population still represented almost 50% of overall population. By 2005, only 5% of the country's wastewater was being treated at all.

engineer put it, "to build such a station only with ponds, 220 ha would have been required (…). Think about it, where would we have put the plant? And can you imagine such a place, with the mosquitoes, the smell?"[15] In another interview, we were told that, "(…) all types of treatments are present here, stations like this are rare in the world".[16] The same engineer informed us that the plant was "cutting-edge, complete". This was consistent with the leaflet issued in 2011 by the utility which stated that the plant was using "some of the most sophisticated technologies in the world".

During our visit, the engineers' discourse was filled with detailed descriptions of the chemical reactions that were part of the treatment process and of the combined production of heat and electricity. The "unusual"[17] features of the plant, such as its energy self-sufficiency, were constantly highlighted. "With one simple click, the golf course receives wastewater treated at the tertiary level. (…) [T]he whole plant is automated in order to reduce human intervention and security risks".[18] As another engineer told us, this high-tech plant was the work of the most qualified professionals. "[W]hen we have to contract out, we use the most experienced specialists (…). We even required the preliminary technical studies to be conducted by renowned firms (…), we did not simply automatically choose the company that built the plant".[19] He added that "this is not just a project, we worked with companies from Switzerland, from the United States of America (…). RADEEMA learned a lot (…)".[20]

From local to national and international recognition

The technological sophistication of the plant has greatly enhanced RADEEMA's status as a local reference institution; engineering students are eager to do their internships at the company and the utility typically welcomes around 60 interns every year. The prestige also applies, however, at the national level. "We often receive visits from other state-owned companies who manage electricity, water and sanitation in other Moroccan cities, because RADEEMA and the wastewater treatment plant represent a pilot project. When they have a problem, it's logical they should come to us".[21] The company also has an international reputation; the same engineer pointed out that

> they come from everywhere, from all over the world, Europe, the United States, Asia, the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, sub-Saharan Africa, Mali, (…) We always have visitors. (…) Engineers and experts in electric power, in waste management (…). The German and Belgian ministers of environment have been here, as well as the European Union Environmental Committee.[22]

Another engineer added that "whenever there is an event in Marrakesh, there will be a visit to the plant on the visitor's agenda (…), when you see it you will be amazed (…). I start by telling each visitor 'You are lucky to visit such a plant'".[23] As yet another interviewee told us, "In Algeria, they only have access to drinking water for six hours a day. In Morocco, water is available every time you open the spigot".[24] Indeed, the UN Environmental Committee cited Morocco as a "model" in the management of treated wastewater reuse (MAP Ecology, 2017).

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[15] Interview, RADEEMA, 4 March 2016.

[16] Interview, 12 March 2016.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Interview, 4 March 2016.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Interview, 11 March 2016(a).

[22] Ibid.

[23] Interview, RADEEMA, 11 March 2016(b).

[24] Interview, RADEEMA, 11 March 2016(c).

This international recognition in turn validates a broader discourse concerning the Moroccan economic 'emergence'. As a delegate from the Ministry for Water stated in 2015, "we have accumulated advanced – even avant-gardist – know-how, concerning non-conventional resources" (Tel Quel, 2016). A RADEEMA engineer echoed this discourse when he explained that "we have made great progress in Morocco, the plant was built by Moroccans, 70% of them were Moroccans, skilled Moroccan engineers (…). We can now implement large-scale projects".[25] When asked about the inputs they received from Waterleau, the Belgian company in charge of building and managing part of the treatment plant,[26] he replied: "[W]hy is Waterleau here? Certainly not because we wouldn't be able to do the job ourselves. If they ask me to manage the plant, I would do it better than them (…)".[27] This confidence reflects a broader national confidence, according to which Morocco is shifting from being a mere follower to becoming an international trendsetter. Traditionally, like comparable countries including Tunisia (Hibou, 1999), the country sought to position itself as a 'good student' on the international stage, a faithful follower of the development model du jour, scrupulously complying – at least formally – with international guidelines and conventions (Vairel, 2014); now, however, Morocco increasingly presents itself as a model to be emulated.[28]

Interpreting the project as a high-tech treatment project meant that the end-of-pipe quality of the reused water was basically rendered irrelevant; in this context, the blame for poor water quality was consistently shifted solely onto the greenkeepers.

Shifting the blame onto the greenkeepers

Golf course managers routinely expressed their frustration with the refusal of the water utility to take responsibility for the final quality of the water it supplies. One manager remarked that "the plant is indeed so sophisticated that they [RADEEMA engineers] do not know how to make it work".[29] Another one complained that "RADEEMA only sees us as clients, and bad-tempered ones, which is a pity".[30] One manager "would like to tell them that their water is not good quality, but we are nothing to them, we are really small. (…) This is the story of David versus Goliath".[31]

Faced with the algal blooms in their ponds and the algae clogging their sprinklers, they protest what they see as the lack of transparency surrounding the water quality tests made at the exit of the wastewater treatment plant. One of them "contacted an expert who had studied in Germany and who was ready to work with us (…) to find a solution to the problem of water quality (…) but RADEEMA says it does not trust these laboratories, instead RADEEMA wants to choose their own laboratories".[32] On another occasion, faced with the uncomplimentary results found by a private laboratory hired by a golf course manager, RADEEMA claimed the sampling was not performed appropriately and that it would have been preferable to carry out the tests using the RADEEMA team.

To maintain its preferred focus on the wastewater treatment plant, the utility responds to clients' complaints by blaming them for not coming to terms with the peculiar qualities of wastewater. An executive recalled that

[25] Interview, 4 March 2016.

[26] Waterleau is the Belgian company that built the second and tertiary treatment components of the plant. (The French company Degrémont built the first treatment component.) It was decided that Waterleau would continue to operate and maintain the sanitation part of the plant and RADEEMA would manage the water reuse part.

[27] Interview, 11 March 2016.

[28] From King Mohammed VI's speech, as pronounced by Prince Moulay Rachid at COP 21 in Paris, 30 November 2015.

[29] Interview with a greenkeeper, Marrakesh, 22 March 2016.

[30] Interview with a greenkeeper, Marrakesh, 23 March 2016.

[31] Interview with a greenkeeper, Marrakesh, 14 March 2016.

[32] Interview with a greenkeeper, Marrakesh, 3 March 2016.

> once, a golf course complained that there were too many mosquitoes and flies stuck to their billboard (…). The fact was, there is a lake [in other words, the collection pond] and right next to it, they had put up a billboard on a white, illuminated wall to display their brand sign. I told him, well, it is normal that the mosquitos are attracted by light at night, there is nothing that can be done about it! (…) Besides, they were not oxygenating their lake. In fact, once they had fixed their oxygenation system, the smell and the algae were reduced (…). Of course, the water isn't clear, but what do they expect? The water complies with treatment standards. They should monitor the quality of the recycled water they receive.[33]

On other occasions, tensions are either denied or downplayed. As one engineer told us, in the beginning the project worried some people, but now it is highly consensual. "[A]t the beginning, they [the golf course managers] were a little anxious as it was the first experience of the kind in Morocco, (…) but now they are satisfied".[34]

Beyond putting the blame on the people they supply, more broadly, RADEEMA engineers refuse to accept any formal responsibility for whatever happens inside the golf resorts. "Our field of intervention is delivering water, and we are already doing them a favour by listening to their complaints, we are not obliged to listen to them, you know (…). As one official put it, "[O]ur obligation to the golf courses – I don't care about their ponds – is to deliver water to their gate, and to make sure it is clean (…). What happens inside the golf course is not my business".[35] When he was told that some scientists thought RADEEMA could help the greenkeepers set up some small-scale complementary treatment facilities on site, he replied that "ours is the optimal solution. If your researchers think otherwise, they should complete their training at RADEEMA".[36] We were regularly reminded that the job of an engineer is primarily to build and operate facilities, not to manage complex and ever-changing relationships with demanding clients; engineers, they informed us, are not managers.

Evidence for the refusal to be held accountable is also testified to in the eight-page, vaguely worded conventions that tie the golf courses to RADEEMA. Aside from defining a few specifications for water storage and delivery, these agreements outline no specific way to channel golf courses' demands or to manage conflicts. Greenkeepers, for example, have no formal recourse if they believe that they received less than the volume of water stipulated in the contract, or if the water is not supplied on time, or if the quality is unsatisfactory; rather, RADEEMA prefers to manage complaints on a case-by-case, ad hoc basis which enables it to avoid assuming any formal commitment. At one point, a greenkeeper decided to put their complaints in writing rather than communicating them by phone or in impromptu talks; this resulted in tensions. "They [RADEEMA] received many emails and they called me yesterday and asked: 'Do you have something against me? Is there a problem?' I said no, there is no problem (…) but that from now on, we were going to keep a paper record of our work with them".[37] In response, RADEEMA's officials claimed that they "try to base the contact between RADEEMA and our clients as far as possible on trust (…). Paperwork is not obligatory, to manage a project, you need trust".[38] 'Trust', here, is perceived as a way to defuse complaints made by the greenkeepers and to deal with the problem of water quality as discreetly as possible.

In short, RADEEMA engineers are well aware of the project's shortcomings regarding water quality; however, rather than assuming any responsibility and getting involved in trial and error experiments and negotiations, they preferred to consider it a strictly private problem that the greenkeepers needed to solve themselves. The main reason for this depoliticising discourse is that water quality is ultimately not

[33] Interview, 3 March 2016.

[34] Interview, 11 March 2016.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Interview, 3 March 2016.

[38] Interview, 11 March 2016.

a priority for RADEEMA; as a sanitation utility, its communication strategy and professional prestige depend entirely on the treatment plant, not on what happens inside golf resorts. In ignoring water quality they found an unlikely ally in the greenkeepers' own managers, the real estate developers who own the golf courses on their property.

THE REAL ESTATE DEVELOPERS' INNOVATION: A PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

The massive expansion of golf resorts in Marrakesh was not driven by real estate developers; rather, it was imposed by public authorities at national and regional levels. From a narrow economic point of view, it was clear from the outset that adding more golf courses to the city would not be profitable. As one golf course manager commented, "I do not see why any economically rational individual would build a golf course in the current situation [Laughs]. It is simply not worth the money".[39] The obligation to buy water from RADEEMA at a high price only made the deal worse from a financial point of view. So why, then, did real estate developers agree to lose money? They did so because, in their opinion, it was the public-private partnership itself which was the innovation, in the way it allowed them to curry favour with public authorities. In the developers' opinion, the real 'project' at stake was luxury condominiums; in this the golf resorts played only a marginal role and were a price that was worth paying. The wastewater reuse project was merely a side attraction, which explains why they pragmatically chose to ignore the quality of the reused water and the complaints made by their own employees, the golf course managers.

The project as a means of access to a more lucrative resource: land

In Marrakesh, access to land for tourism-related projects is controlled by the Regional Investment Center (CRI), a public entity which was created in 2002 to coordinate public action between local and foreign investors; it is headed by the wali himself. It is supposed to base its decisions on the city's master plan, however, when we conducted our study, the master plan had not been updated since 1996. In theory, this should preclude any change in land use on the city's periphery, especially changes from agriculture to tourism; however, just like in other Moroccan cities, the fact that the plan was out of date has been used to justify the setting up of special "exemption commissions" (*commissions de dérogation*) which are tasked with granting access to public (domanial) land around Marrakesh on a case-by-case basis. All real estate projects that include golf courses have been approved by these commissions. Not surprisingly, the lack of transparency concerning these projects is widely considered to favour investors with good political connections. The decisions taken are all the more important because, as many individual golf course managers confided (and as frequently reported in the local media), public land tends to be ceded at a heavily discounted, sometimes symbolic, price.[40] In this context, as acknowledged by one interlocutor at the CRI, the 'golf-for-land' deal is an open secret: "Well, property developers did benefit from an exemption that allowed them to build on state-owned land. But this exemption was conditional on building golf resorts".[41] Indeed, as a golf manager underlined,

> [T]hey are constrained (…) because it is the State, otherwise, I don't know who would oblige us to build golf courses. It is surely not the developer himself who decides to build a golf course, it is the State telling him to include a golf course in his project. It is certainly not because someone did some market research and showed we needed 15 golf courses in Marrakesh, because of course, it's economic suicide. It is because if you want a real estate project here, you have to include a golf course.[42]

[39] Interview, 3 March 2016.

[40] Interview, 3 March 2016.

[41] Interview, 10 March 2016.

[42] Interview, 3 March 2016.

However, the deal was not limited to golf courses, but also included the use of wastewater to irrigate them. Not surprisingly, none of the golf course managers were happy to be obliged to use treated wastewater. One told us bluntly that he had been forced to join the project with a "gun to his head".[43] Another reported that,

> in 2007, the Wilaya decided that the golf resorts were going to finance the Marrakech wastewater reuse project, which is kind of insidious (…), a sort of friendly racket because all resorts need water (…). In the end, the Wilaya had the leverage to impose the funding of the project on us, and we had to sign the agreement.[44]

Furthermore, as can be seen in Table 1, the recycling project (i.e. the tertiary treatment facilities and the pipe networks exiting the plant) was entirely financed by them.

Table 1. Financing structure of the project.

Source	Effective amount (US$)	Ratio
RADEEMA	81,700,000	66%
Equity	48,700,000	
Debt	33,000,000	
State subsidies	15,000,000	12%
Golf courses	26,500,000	22%
Total	123,200,000	100%

Source: RADEEMA, 2016.

Moreover, in order to allow RADEEMA to recover its maintenance and distribution costs, the water rates set were high. At 2.5 MAD per cubic metre, they represented more than half the rates paid for local drinking water and at least six times the cost of irrigation water pumped from wells. This is in addition to the fact that real estate developers had to pay over US$2 million each in upfront contributions for the water distribution infrastructure and are now obliged to buy at least 80% of their annual water volume from RADEEMA.[45]

This raw deal only makes sense, therefore, when interpreted as the price of access to land. As a further compensation, golf resorts drive up property values. As one manager explained,

> if you have a golf resort with properties surrounding it, you can sell the property at a higher price. In 2015, a golf course is going to lose some five million dirhams out of a total budget of 10 million (…). But five million is the price of two apartments or one villa, which are then easier to sell.[46]

From this point of view, poor water quality is a small price to pay and certainly not worth fighting over; this is all the more so if we look beyond the direct profitability of any individual project and consider the broader patterns of economic exchange between real estate developers and the Makhzen in Morocco.

Benign neglect motivated by wider economic transactions

The real estate developers who have been building golf courses in Marrakesh are all important business players nationwide. They fall into three broad categories. The first category comprises two of the largest

[43] Interview, 22 March 2016.

[44] Interview, 23 March 2016.

[45] The average water consumption in Marrakesh being above 1 Mm^3 per year, we are looking at a bill of at least US$200,000 per year for each golf course.

[46] Interview, 22 March 2016.

Moroccan real estate companies. The first company owns three resorts and is headed by the third-wealthiest man in the country (according to the 2016 Forbes ranking). Originally centred on public housing, the company entered the high-end housing market in the mid-2000s. The second company owns two resorts, a holding that is typical of the family conglomerates that dominate the Moroccan economy. Also active in industry, agriculture, mining and education, the revenues of this holding total 5 billion MAD. The second group of real estate developers consists of international investors; this category includes two French hotel groups, and a Kuwaiti real estate company that is one of the leading real estate developers in the Middle East and North African region which has total assets close to US$2 billion.

These two groups depend heavily on the Moroccan state for access to land and public contracts and to obtain authorisation for their many projects. All these holdings have innumerable projects in Morocco and, as such, they have a strong incentive not to calculate their profitability on a project-by-project basis, but rather on a broader scale. One of the French groups, for example, owns more than 40 hotels and 9 brands in the kingdom, whereas the Kuwaiti portfolio includes retail complexes, hotels, resorts, residential buildings, high-rise office buildings and mixed-use developments.

Finally, there are projects that fall into the third category, that of direct public or royal control. One state-owned financial institution that manages the country's long-term savings is also a major investor, especially in the tourism sector. The royal golf course is directly owned by the Moroccan royal family, while another is part of a big Moroccan private holding company that is mainly owned by the royal family.

Taken together, these three groups of business actors are representative of the overall structure of capital ownership in Morocco, where shareholder capitalism and public companies have never been central (Oubenal, 2016) and where family ownership coexist alongside foreign capital (especially from France and Gulf countries) and royal capital. The latter blurs the boundary between the public realm and the private one, (Hibou, 2004; Boussaid, 2016) while the mutually beneficial – although sharply asymmetrical – transactions in which family and foreign capital are engaged with the Makhzen illustrate Dillman's (2001: 201) general observation that political regimes in the Maghreb

> have been quite adept at (…) determining the mechanisms by which public and external resources are divvied up. The more they 'deregulate' the more they 're-regulate' by deciding exactly who will most easily benefit from change and join the distributional coalition to tap profits in the market.

These ongoing, ever-changing negotiations between representatives of the palace and a select club of large business conglomerates represent the key modus operandi of Moroccan capitalism today (Catusse, 2009: 9; see also Najem, 2001).

None of these business actors, therefore, has any interest in direct confrontation with a public water utility or with the networks within the Ministry of the Interior that stand behind it; for them, from a financial point of view, it remains a largely secondary matter, and the risks of sparking conflict over water quality would far outweigh any potential rewards. Investors, understandably, prefer to be satisfied with the existing 'partnership', which leads them to actively suppress the complaints put forward by their own employees; most greenkeepers make it quite clear they receive no support from their hierarchy. As one interviewee, with a laugh, described the situation:

> [E]very time the atmosphere gets seriously overheated, the RADEEMA regional director suddenly shows up with two of their salesmen, with files full of test results (…). And then everyone kisses and makes up, a few *labess alik* [in colloquial Arabic, How are you doing?] are exchanged. The director [i.e. the local head of the real estate development project] then comes up and asks: "So, how are you doing, my friend? Are there any problems?" "Of course not", we reply, "what kind of problem could you mean?"[47]

Real estate developers, in short, have their own good reasons for defusing the problem of water quality. They could not, of course, care less about wastewater reuse being touted as a new water resource since

[47] Interview, 23 March 2016.

they did not even want to build a golf resort in the first place, and while they may have few (if any) reasons to care about the wastewater treatment plant, they certainly do care about maintaining a close partnership with state authorities at different levels. Consequently, depoliticisation appears to be neither a concerted strategy nor the product of an agreement about a shared narrative; rather, it emerges as the lowest common denominator of agreement between actors who otherwise have very different understandings of the project and of the innovation it is supposed to represent.

CONCLUSION: MULTIPLE PATHWAYS LEAD TO (WATER) DEPOLITICISATION

Over the last three decades, depoliticisation has been described as a far-reaching social phenomenon, especially in advanced political economies, although it may now be receding in the face of political re-polarisation (Hay, 2007; Achcar, 2012; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). Political scientists have insisted – in many cases rightly so – on the dense coordination network behind the production of depoliticising discourses; however, the depoliticisation of poor quality reused water in Marrakesh was not the product of a policy community or a discourse coalition. There was no coordination around a common narrative or story line; rather, there was only a circumstantial confluence around a vague idea, that of innovation. Innovation meant very different things to state elites, local sanitation engineers and real estate developers. End-of-pipe water quality, however, was not a defining part of it for any of these actors and was therefore not worth politicising. In short, and to the dismay of the greenkeepers, every key actor had their own good reasons to neutralise the issue.

The fact that depoliticisation operated in such an uncoordinated, dispersed way may seem counterintuitive, as Morocco may rather appear to have a political regime conducive to vertically coordinated depoliticisation. This suggests that depoliticisation through ambiguous agreements may be even more widespread in more pluralistic polities. A research agenda is thus called for which focuses on the role of ambiguity in depoliticisation, alongside other macro-mechanisms such as hegemony or the sheer invisibilisation of decision-making. The fact that depoliticisation can take different forms and can be produced by very different mechanisms could shed light on the ubiquity of the phenomenon in contemporary politics, whether formally liberal-democratic or authoritarian. We may also wonder whether different forms of depoliticisation might be vulnerable to different re-politicising strategies.

Finally, our case study also has more specific implications for how we think about the depoliticising effects of large infrastructure projects on water issues. These projects can depoliticise water insofar as they 'black box' politics, rendering political relations invisible (Folch, 2019). They may also result in cultural hegemony through their generation of compelling narratives of progress, modernisation and prosperity. They can also, however, impoverish politics through ambiguous agreements; having no fixed meaning, they can be quietly accommodated by different types of actors without the need to engage in public debate. What is called for is a systematic inquiry into the various mechanisms of depoliticisation, their respective causes and effects, and the way they interact. We should no longer assume that the same effect automatically has the same causes, and instead should explore the different pathways to water depoliticisation and, ultimately, to water re-politicisation.

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