

# CAN SOCIAL UNEQUALS BE FRIENDS? WESTERN TOURISTS AND THEIR MAGHREBI HOSTS NEGOTIATE MORAL AMBIGUITY

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## ABSTRACT

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Digital communication and travel have considerably widened the range of people who we can potentially connect with and befriend. These emerging relationships often cut across national, cultural and economic boundaries. This article explores the trajectories and moral reasoning of such ties between unequal partners in the Maghreb. Based on my ethnographic fieldwork in Tunis (2009) and Marrakech (2010), I analyse the specific case of Couchsurfing.org, that is, the locally most widespread Internet-based hospitality network. I examine the moral negotiations of the friendships enacted in the creative space of ‘touristic borderzones’ (Bruner 1996), which are characterised by inequality and economic disparity. This will be explored in a comparative framework, with most Tunisian members being far more privileged than their Moroccan counterparts in terms of purchasing power and access to international mobility. The bigger theoretical question behind much of this discussion concerns the possibility of amity regardless of usual categories such as social class, nationality, age or gender.

Keywords: hospitality networks, friendship, inequality, exchange, Morocco, Tunisia

## *Introduction*

The Internet has revolutionised the ways many people reach out to strangers, integrate them into their social world and establish relationships. Computer-mediated communication, just like increased mobility, challenges the assumption that physical proximity determines our friendships. In the context of tourism, this question of contemporary forms of connectivity and the ways we relate to *a priori* strangers while travelling is especially challenging in the case of Internet-based hospitality networks that have given rise to new possibilities to increase the range of people with whom participants can potentially connect or become friends. This article offers an exploration of these emerging friendships by analysing the case of the most widespread hospitality exchange network in the Maghreb, Couchsurfing.org. I will argue that members’ understandings of the relationship between transactional and emotional dimensions of friendship are reminiscent of their social and class background. In Tunisia, several Couchsurfers’ conceptions resemble dominant

Western ideals of utility-free bonds of amity in important ways, while diverging from them in other points.

*Studying Internet-based hospitality networks*

Online hospitality networks constitute the fastest growing new form of tourism practice in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their members offer free overnight stays for other participants at their homes. Today, millions of people use Couchsurfing to get in touch with ‘locals’ when travelling, to meet up for a drink, to be shown around, or to be hosted (usually for a couple of nights). The number of participants currently exceeds 4,000 in Tunisia and 17,000 in Morocco (Couchsurfing 2012).<sup>1</sup> Most are relatively young, unattached and live in urban centres. In terms of gender, a majority of more than 70 per cent are male in Tunisia. In Marrakech, there are practically no women involved in the network.

While various online features facilitate contact with people living at a distance, online-to-offline hospitality exchange also offers the opportunity of a physical encounter, face-to-face contact—at least during the limited time of the traveller’s visit. Thousands of members in Morocco and Tunisia actively aspire to make new friendships with persons from across the globe. Exploring members’ motivations to seek friends elsewhere, Bialski’s (2008) interview partners in Montreal indicated that they felt their relationships with Couchsurfers were more meaningful than those with people they ‘had known for years’. In fact, the ideological underpinning of Couchsurfing invokes the notion of friendship. As becomes obvious in the constantly updating statistics on how many ‘friendships’ have been created thanks to the network, the organisation focuses both on a discourse of friendship and an appeal to share a certain morality based on cosmopolitan aspirations.

This ethnographic study is based on my intensive periods of fieldwork in Tunis (2009) and Marrakech (2010), as well as longer-term residence and study in Tunisia. I conducted participant observation of Couchsurfing activities in both locales and in some relevant online forums on Couchsurfing.org.

The primary characteristic of these friendships is that they stand outside of common forms of socialising among people in their usual surroundings. Thereby, hospitality networks have brought about supposedly ‘unlikely couplings’ who relate across differences in nationality, culture, religion, age, gender and differing economic standards. In this article I seek to draw out the moral underpinnings of these types of social ties that are characterised by sharp contrasts and inequalities.

I will first contextualise the hospitality encounters in Tunis and Marrakech, before I comment on the aspects local members value most in their involvement with foreigners. I then move on to explore how inequality influences Couchsurfing friendships enacted with less privileged Moroccan participants, and how they negotiate exchange in an environment of inequity. Following on from this, I will then point to the contrasting situation in Tunisia, where many members are sceptical about the possibility of becoming friends with differently classed co-nationals.

*Couchsurfing friendships in the Maghreb*

My research pursues a comparative scope by looking at Couchsurfing communities in both Tunis and Marrakech where it is mainly members' different educational and class backgrounds, rather than inherent differences at a national level, that make them meaningful cases for comparison. My empirical study revealed that participants in Tunis tend to come from (relatively) prosperous families, and are representatives of what one would call the middle class. Their professions are generally regarded as prestigious and fulfilling: secondary school teachers, medical doctors or sales agents. A considerable number still study at university. In contrast, the majority of Marrakechi members dropped out of school as teenagers and are concerned with issues of nonstandard employment and instability of income. Most grew up in the nearby mountainous regions and moved to the city in the hope of increasing their chances to find jobs.

Besides these discrepancies between Maghrebi participants, there are various forms of inequality shaping the involvement between them and the incoming foreign travellers who they befriend. The latter are mostly from Europe or North America, both female and male, and either the same age as their local hosts or older. Couchsurfing involvements in places like North Africa, where there is a postcolonial element, push us to think about unequal access to international travel, purchasing power and the differential degrees of exposure to the scrutiny of local police (Buchberger 2011). In my research, I sought to understand how these disparities translate into hospitality practices and the wish to reach out to Western members. To what degree do Couchsurfers assume that social unequals can be friends? In many ways, the emerging friendships cut across various differences, which often involve economic standard and social standing. Ultimately, these complex negotiations of exchange and (expected) reciprocity in interactions with foreign friends raise the fundamental question of the possibilities, and limits, of relating to others beyond these usual categorisations that so powerfully govern social interactions found elsewhere. Focusing on issues of material exchange, I examine the ways Couchsurfing encounters in the Maghreb often involve morally ambiguous claims to bonding.

Although the Couchsurfing website proudly announces that the organisation exists in 207 countries in the world (Couchsurfing 2012), the unequal distribution of opportunities to engage in the project cannot be denied (Germann Molz 2007). Maghrebi members and most of their foreign Couchsurfing guests are highly unequal in various respects. Their relationships connect realities shaped by disparities and contrasting standards in purchasing power. This stands in contrast to the claimed importance of equality between participants, both in widespread Western conceptions of friendship as well as in promoted ideals of relations between Couchsurfers. A number of authors (Leach 1968; Paine 1969; Allan 1989; Desai and Killick 2010) have described the absence of hierarchy and authority as an integral characteristic of friendship, which sets it apart from kinship, which is 'often associated with hierarchical distinctions based on age or status as an affine or consanguine' (Desai and Killick 2010: 12). The inequality and the different roles ascribed to 'host' and 'guest' challenge this conception of 'friendship' as it is enacted in Internet-based hospitality in the Maghreb. Germann Molz (2007), for instance, illustrates the importance to Couchsurfing of the illusion of a certain social and ideological homogeneity among members that is crucial in the development of trust.

In a potentially 'risky' network, trust is generalised across the community of strangers by framing those strangers as more 'like-minded' than they are 'different'.<sup>2</sup> In an echo of Aristotelian ideals, Couchsurfing appears to consider 'friendship' as viable only between pairs of individuals united by their similarity. How, then, does such a network deal with these inequalities and discrepancies? If friendship is understood in this way, as a social category built on ideas of equality, mutuality, proximity and voluntariness, Couchsurfing 'friendships' are challenged by the often substantial gap between economic standards and other registers of inequality between members.

Besides inequality, transience also shapes interactions between foreign tourists and Maghrebis. Orientalist imaginaries and various global issues and antagonisms are mediated at the individual level of face-to-face encounters. In an environment characterised by mistrust, this transitory nature can challenge the possibility of establishing trust and close relationships. In several of my Couchsurfing encounters in Morocco and Tunisia, unity between 'friends' was tenuously achieved. Many members made it clear that they considered interruptions in constant, ongoing contact as a marker of lack of commitment in friendship, and, thus, lack of friendship. In a similar way, members expect regular online contact via emails and interaction on social networking sites. As Maghrebis have, on the whole, fewer chances to cultivate these friendships after the visitor's departure, a failure on the latter's part to answer when being contacted online often acquires the quality of personal deceit.<sup>3</sup> Expressions of interest in the hosts' lives and the emotional closeness of the face-to-face encounter, in hindsight, can appear false and dishonest. It seems that, through the possibility of prolonged contact via Internet, the 'guest-friend' can actually 'betray the intimacy of his host' (Lindholm 1982: 236). As they are never actually 'absent' in the sense that they cannot be contacted, given mutual willingness, there is always the risk that the relationship might be cut off by one of the parties involved.

Before I move on to the fascination with this sort of social tie that exists despite these challenging circumstances, it is important to look at local distinctions within friendship. Although the official discourse on the Couchsurfing website extols the values of 'cosmopolitan friends', not all participants in the Maghreb would equally speak of their foreign guests in this way. In Tunisia, a lot of members differentiate between 'friends' and 'Couchsurfing friends', the latter indicating a lesser degree of emotional closeness.<sup>4</sup> A 'Couchsurfing friend' is seen as someone with whom you spend time, someone you see at Couchsurfing meetings, or with whom you take a day trip. Interestingly, some participants would often call foreign guests 'friends', and explain that they see many fellow Tunisian members only as 'Couchsurfing friends', suggesting that they are people with whom they share activities and time, but who are not as important to them as some 'intense' and 'close' encounters with foreign travellers. In contrast to Tunisian participants, who see specific advantages and qualities in friendships with foreigners as opposed to their ties with other Tunisians, many Moroccans would not speak of foreign members as their friends. Instead, the persons they do call 'friends' (*ṣḥāb*) are their fellow Marrakechi members. Foreign travellers and guests are referred to as *guwwar*.<sup>5</sup> This reveals that the focus is more on a type than on the individual person with whom you might have a close relationship.

*Belonging and self-fashioning*

In the next step I move on to those aspects Maghrebi Couchsurfers value in their relationships with foreign members (that they qualify as ‘friendships’) and what sets them apart from their involvements with people in their Tunisian and Moroccan surroundings. Here, entertainment, self-fashioning, claims of belonging and the notion of ‘ambassadorship’ are at the core of friendship between many Maghrebi Couchsurfers and their foreign guests.

The entertainment aspect of hospitality is often central to friendship as a form of pleasurable interaction. This was of particular importance in Marrakech, in a context where the paucity of jobs, forced inertia and boredom threaten to become an overwhelming sense of being. When Couchsurfing guests are perceived as unwilling to engage with local participants and to ‘share stories’, it often leads to disappointments. During my fieldwork I spoke to several Marrakechi members who felt frustrated by their previous Couchsurfing relationships. One person explained his disappointment angrily: ‘They [i.e. Western guests] did not want to share anything! We [i.e. Moroccans] share everything. (...) They did not talk! They did not want to discuss!’ What members would often hope for are discussions about any kind of controversial, ‘hot’ topics, such as Western interventionism or the ‘status’ of women in Islam. Their face-to-face encounters with foreigners, they hoped, would give them a chance to confront what they conceive of as ‘Islamophobia’. Being disappointed by the lack of entertainment provided by guests through the ‘sharing of stories’ and ‘discussion’, some Moroccan members sought amusement at the cost of Western travellers. In many Couchsurfing meet-ups in cafés on Jemaa el Fna Square, I got the impression that the boundaries between merriment *with* a person and humour and amusement *about* a person could be very blurred. Most activities with foreign guests were not pursued with them alone, but in a wider group of several Moroccan Couchsurfers. Here, the interaction with Westerners does not reduce the importance of ‘local’ friends. It does not lead to the abandonment of friendships among Moroccans, but rather serves as a pleasurable shared activity within the group.

In both countries, foreign friends become an (important) additional audience for self-narratives. Tunisian members share the general understanding that Western backpackers hold a number of deep-seated stereotypes about ‘Arabs’ or ‘Islam’. Still, the role of foreign Couchsurfers goes beyond the one of an—albeit amusing—‘audience’. Rather, they are considered as individuals many Tunisian (and some Moroccan) members feel they can connect with better than with most of the people they grew up with or got to know through work or common acquaintances.

My friendship with chemist Lilia is a good example to illustrate Couchsurfing encounters in Tunisia. The strong emphasis on family ties as the underpinnings of society meant that ‘friendships’ were considered negligible relationships that were very much controlled by parents. It was only after Lilia had moved to the opposite end of Tunisia that she gained enough independence to have foreign ‘friends’ around—secretively—whether female or male. By getting involved in Couchsurfing, she put an end to the exclusivity of friendship, principally in terms of gender and origin, and developed alternative conceptions of friendship to fit her lived experience with Couchsurfers. At the time of my fieldwork, she was among those members who felt most isolated and lonesome in her

usual environment. After she had moved to Southern Tunisia to start her job as manager of a desalination plant, she could no longer see her family and friends back home in Tunis on a regular basis. This led to a considerable yearning for companionship. While she was hosting me for three days, she stressed how delighted she was that she finally had someone with whom she could talk and exchange views. And, indeed, she kept talking like a waterfall, about her family, everyday life in her job, cooking recipes, the plants in her garden, the upcoming presidential elections in 2009, and her aspirations for the future. Importantly, she sought my advice on issues her Tunisian environment would consider 'crazy', most prominently her idea of leaving her secure and well-paid job in order to start a doctorate in Japan, the 'country of her dreams'. Besides the financial aspect, this would further delay marriage by a couple of years, at a time when her parents had already been putting pressure on her to get married for quite a while. We spent long hours discussing various options for her future, such as whether she could imagine marrying a Japanese convert to Islam, or how likely it would be that she could find a Tunisian husband willing to accompany her to Japan.

Like Lilia, many other Tunisian members expressed a feeling that people in their usual surroundings would not understand their aspirations and thoughts.<sup>6</sup> They often used the language of 'freedom' to explain their fascination with the creative character of their friendships with 'outsiders' to their concrete local environment. The articulation of various sensitive issues like local politics or their self-identification as agnostics seems easier to achieve with their 'cosmopolitan friends' from outside of Tunisia or Morocco. One element that became obvious in Lilia's story is the future-orientation of many Couchsurfing relationships. What people were keen to talk about, and envision, were various future scenarios, many of which included migration abroad. One male Tunisian member, for instance, said he wanted to 'lead a Western life with a Western wife'. Couchsurfing provides an important opportunity for him not only to get to know potential 'wives', but also to prepare himself more generally for insertion into 'a different culture'. He has taken a conscious decision to change his life, in which his Couchsurfing friendships serve a crucial role in this wider project of self-fashioning.

Many Maghrebis suppose that travelling by Couchsurfing is a moral project for foreigners, and they feel they have a 'mission' to support them in their attempts to critically review their deep-seated stereotypes towards the Arab world or Islam. Most Moroccan participants hold the conviction that Couchsurfing activities are a meaningful and laudable engagement that helps to confront, and reduce, resentments against them. What practically all members share is the self-understanding as representatives or 'ambassadors' (in a prosaic sense),<sup>7</sup> who seek to impress (potentially fearful or sceptical) Westerners with their peaceableness, friendliness and 'open-mindedness'.

#### *Expected reciprocity in conditions of financial restraint*

Besides Couchsurfing relationships as a way of ethically shaping the self and pursuing a 'mission', ethical negotiations of friendships are also very present in more conflictive ways. A lot of 'boundary drawing' situations that could lead to terminating a friendship with another member are related to latent tensions about money issues. In both

Morocco and Tunisia, a frequent way to disgrace a person in front of others is to call them 'stingy' (*baḥīl*). Given the omnipresence of this accusation, it seems that people hate to 'admit or expose feelings of greediness' (Hollan 2008: 484). The accusation of stinginess is particularly often directed against Western Couchsurfers. In Marrakech, these conflicts frequently escalated both offline and online in the Morocco forum on the Couchsurfing website. While most *guwwar* members take a tough stance on this issue in forum discussions, many Moroccan (and some Tunisian) participants would see issues of instrumentality in Couchsurfing friendships as negotiable and morally indefinite. What appears to happen is that in coping with the ambiguities of friendship, the protagonists of these interactions are constantly led to negotiate inconsistencies in their everyday lives and to revise their 'moral reasoning' (Sykes [ed.] 2009), by discussing the role of 'money issues' in the constitution, or obliteration, of friendship.

One of them is Zied, a Marrakechi member in his mid-twenties. Since he dropped out of school as a teenager, he has been struggling to earn some money through occasional jobs which do not provide sufficient income, thereby affecting his diet. He often talked to me about the constraints on his participation in Couchsurfing in comparison to the way most of his Western guests took part in the international network. Nonetheless, his limited opportunities to profit from Couchsurfing as a guest when travelling abroad did not initially lead him to develop alternative expectations of reciprocity besides being 'hosted back'. He joined Couchsurfing out of curiosity and a fascination with linking up with the wider world to meet 'people who are different from [him]'. At the beginning, he had the understanding that he should be the one paying for drinks, sandwiches and bus tickets whenever he had a foreign guest around. This is partly related to his status as Moroccan and his gender; as both the 'host', and a man receiving female 'surfers', he considered it his duty to issue invitations. But this understanding of the proper behaviour towards guests gradually changed over time. Who will be expected to invite, and then pay for, friends, is related to complex dialectics of gender, the financial situation of the people involved, as well as the location of the café in relation to their homes. In both Marrakech and Tunis, I often observed that, among male members going out to a café with friends, the person living closest to the particular venue would be expected to pay for the others' teas, coffees or soft drinks. On several occasions, people explained the practice of inviting friends to a nearby café as replacing an invitation to one's home that would cause 'too much hassle for the family'.

But the friend in whose neighbourhood people meet is still ascribed the role of the 'host' in important ways. They would suggest the place to meet, and be expected to pay at the end. In Tunisia, where male members do have female Tunisian 'friends' as well, it would most often be they who would invite the women. As 'mixed' (*muḥtallit*) *salons de thé* are rather upscale, the location is usually not in the immediate neighbourhood of either of the friends, but in the city centre or one of the northern suburbs of Tunis. During my fieldwork stay, a male friend from Béja, a region in the northwest of the country, would never let me pay, explaining that I was 'the guest' in Tunisia. I answered jokingly that he was more my guest as he was visiting me in Tunis and had travelled for some hours to get there. But it seemed that my status as non-Tunisian led to my permanent role as 'guest', regardless of how much time I had been living in the country. Some other members, however, did ascribe to me the role of a 'local' at some point and

expected me to engage in practices of money giving and lending among close friends. In Morocco, I often heard people asking friends for a little financial support, saying *qubb* (m.) or *qubbī* (f.) (literally: cough) to indicate that they were in need of money. They would then take the cash and walk off to buy cigarettes, a sandwich or a glass of avocado smoothie. Giving money does not contradict friendship; in fact, it is among the moral dimensions on which close friendship relies.

Just like Zied, other Moroccans described the financial and emotional burden of their hosting ideals when they actually try to live up to their own principles of generosity. A few who were not hosting in their homes, limiting their activities to showing people around, stated that they felt overwhelmed by their own expectations; they would rather not host at all so as not to have to cope with a bad conscience or outside criticism. Although Zied had also felt like that during his first Couchsurfing encounters, after two years of active participation he began to be easier on himself about things that used to make him feel guilty. Becoming more integrated into the Couchsurfing community, his moral practices and understandings regarding how to treat Western guests-cum-friends gradually underwent shifts of interpretation and change. He has come to perceive it as 'normal', for example, that surfers should offer to invite him at times.

Out of financial necessity, he sometimes even uses a little trickery: when he welcomes a new guest, he is often sitting in the living room with his best friend. They are chatting, drinking tea, and smoking a joint together. Some pictures on his Couchsurfing profile show a cannabis leaf or him smoking, which should attract travellers who wish to smoke during their Morocco trip. After this first joint, Zied and his friend usually say that they have unfortunately run out of cannabis, hoping that this might encourage the travellers to offer to pay for fresh supply out of a certain feeling of obligation towards their host. Not knowing about the usual Moroccan prices, foreigners tend to give twice as much as necessary. Zied secretly keeps the margin, which certainly does not constitute a substantial 'income', but he gets enough cash to allow him to accompany his guest on day trips for a few days. He can pay for his bus tickets himself and eventually even invite the guest for a sandwich or 'Moroccan tea'—without the person knowing that this money was originally theirs anyway. The appearance of generosity is maintained, despite his very limited financial means. While relaxing his expectations regarding his duties as 'host', it is still crucial to Zied to be able to 'invite' the guest—which he does, as he understands it.<sup>8</sup>

### *Conflicts over instrumentality and friendship in Morocco*

The moral ambiguity in Zied's reasoning corresponds with wider perceptions of the many Moroccans who, while not employed in the tourism industry, try to make a living through 'informal contacts' with international tourists. Practices like leading foreigners around the *medina* and taking a commission when they purchase something in the *souk* are not considered especially morally problematic. Double-dealing and turning foreigners' lack of local knowledge to their (financial) advantage demands creativity, and the partial acceptance of these practices locally derives from an acknowledgement of skills such as a mastery of foreign languages and some talent at trickery. But this widespread acceptance also follows the logic that the wealthier 'friend' should pay for others. Locals contrast the



poverty of Maghrebis to the wealth of foreigners. This perceived economic advantage morally justifies the attempt to establish relationships for pragmatic ends (cf. Buchberger 2011), to provide themselves with a livelihood. In Morocco, colloquial Arabic expressions that comment on people overcharging and making money from tourists illustrate the moral ambiguity of this form of profit at the cost of the (supposedly richer) other. Adjectives like *sga'* (bad) or *ḥat.ar* (dangerous) are used with irony; they are commendatory and express appreciation for the Moroccan's extraordinary skills in sharp practice. Other expressions, however, reveal genuine criticism, such as *ḥayna mqawed* (that's someone who does anything to profit from others) or *wagħhū* mqas.dar (his face is tinny, that is, he does not show any emotions of shame or regret when he cheats someone).

Here, a fruitful parallel can be drawn with Smith's (2002, 2003) critique of Geertz's characterisation of Moroccans as 'combative' and his talk of a 'constant testing of wills as individuals struggle to seize what they covet, defend what they have, and recover what they have lost' (Geertz 1983: 114). According to Geertz, the 'hyperindividualism' in social interactions allows the Moroccan self to be 'totally pragmatic, adaptive, opportunistic, and generally ad hoc' (Geertz 1983). Smith, however, argues that Geertz should have made a clear distinction between practices of 'bargaining' (*štara*) and the 'private sphere of friendship and family' (2003: 90). In the latter, according to Smith, the 'combative public identity' (ibid.) plays a negligible role. Hence, Moroccan hospitality and friendship were in fact 'real' and 'sincere', not 'bargained for' and 'strategic' as Geertz would have it.

Although I appreciate Smith's critique that Geertz's fieldwork included few other spheres but the market, his insistence that Moroccan friendship and hospitality are devoid of ulterior motives seems of little help. Deconstructing this ideal in Western thought certainly makes more sense and allows for analyses of complex motivations and realities which are excluded by a self-imposed rejection of pragmatic interest in 'sincere' friendship. Following on from a variety of authors (Bell and Coleman [eds] 1999; Santos Granero 2007; Desai and Killick 2010; Coleman 2010; Torresan 2011), it seems more fruitful to move beyond idealised and purified approaches in order to uncover the variegated forms of friendship in different ethnographic locales. This strand of theorising affective and transactional dimensions of friendship is clearly linked to wider (feminist and other) studies proposing that money and utilitarian expectations run through all affective bonds and always involve power; monetary exchange, therefore, does not 'corrupt' intimacy (Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1999; Folbre and Nelson 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Zelizer 2005; Williams and Zelizer 2005; Cabezas 2009).

While curiosity and utility are closely intertwined in Zied's aspirations, and involve genuine interest and amusement, for a few other members in Morocco the financial aspect is the dominant driving force in their ties with *guwwar* surfers. In a very few extreme cases, hosting Couchsurfers provides the main household income. I know of one family in a rural area which has foreign 'guests' around every day. They announce that they will 'invite' them for couscous in the evening. Saying that this is a unique opportunity to 'experience' Moroccan cuisine, the Couchsurfers are offered the opportunity to participate in the preparation and help out in the kitchen. Normally this strategy works very well, with tourists being enthusiastic about the chance to view the 'backstage' of everyday life in a Moroccan family. It is then suggested that they accompany the mother to the local market to buy vegetables and meat, and are practically always happy to

offer to pay for the ingredients. This reduces the family's food expenses dramatically, as leftovers are usually enough for the following day as well. It allows the family members to have meat regularly—an unusual luxury for families of their social class. Several other Moroccan users would not try to hide the fact that they profited financially from their Couchsurfers, openly asking for a particular amount of money at the end of their stay without having announced this beforehand. Many Western members become irritated by the instrumental character of ties with Moroccans that contradict the claim that Couchsurfing relationships should be 'not-for-profit'. For them, taking commissions or getting 'ripped off' by traders with the help of their hosts clearly breaches the moral limit of ties qualified as 'Couchsurfing friendships'.

Although the Couchsurfing project, as a B-corporation in US-American law, is officially profit-oriented, individual members should not seek financial gain from their contact with other participants or make money from their guests. What remains unsaid in this official discourse of the institution is the unequal distribution of economic resources and the global economic 'north-south' divide that shapes encounters between members. In the forum and in offline meetings, there are only a very few occasions in which issues of poverty, begging and economic resources come up. Instead, the predominant discourse focuses on accusations that Arabs 'use their guests' financially, through such practices as taking a commission, trying to sell them camel trips, or charging money for the overnight stay or meal at home. When diverging conceptions of friendship and its moral dimensions collide, people are led to articulate the contours of their expectations. What would often stay unsaid in other contexts becomes explicit in case of conflict. In particular, the Morocco forum is full of narratives of 'rip-offs'. This publicly-aired resentment of what has been interpreted as moral transgression implicitly reveals the moral expectations among Western travellers. The travel narratives and complaints about local hosts entail a process of confirming with others that the 'rip-offs' perceived by an individual as a personal affront and transgression of the Couchsurfing code, are also recognised as such by others; they are collectively condemned. Western travellers would often take a position of moral superiority, which simultaneously places the other in a position of immorality. In talking about their 'travel experiences' in Morocco, Western surfers provide a particular perspective on events. In sum, these narratives of betrayal have often come to dominate the forum in recent years, creating a public debate on local moral issues. These conflicts foreground tensions between different friendship discourses and the potential inter-cultural collision of diverging understandings of utility in social relationships.

Being confronted with accusations of moral inferiority in their Couchsurfing interactions, a few Moroccans seem to have equally taken the view that Moroccan members' approaches are morally questionable. A former 'city ambassador' of Marrakech, Karem, for example, stresses how often he has been 'disappointed' by his fellow Couchsurfers in Morocco. He is even planning to publish a not-for-profit journal for tourists that would be distributed for free nearby main tourist attractions, warning them of common dangers and problems they are likely to encounter. This journal is meant to be the answer to the perceived need to 'protect' international tourists from 'ill-intentioned' locals. In both countries, several participants told me about their admiration for Western backpackers, whom they conceived as less materialist than their own compatriots.

This exclusivity among equals with no utilitarian need for each other debars several 'outsiders' who do not fit the mould of this ideal. These processes of exclusion and claims to moral superiority in friendships are reminiscent of Carrier's (1999) suggestion that the development of common Western conceptions of amity and, in particular, the ideology of personal freedom and autonomy in the making of friends, are essentially a reflection of an elite male social position. The conception of perfect friendship, devoid of utility, is reduced to sentiment and intimate connections, and masks inequalities. Socially marginalised groups who tend to include pragmatic considerations such as the need for financial support in their friendships, have internalized the norm and, for this reason, are left feeling inadequate in their social lives because their social ties do not conform to the ideal, according to Carrier (1999: 35f.).

*Preference for social equals among the Tunisian upper-middle class*

What Western participants' complaints reveal are, in part, their anti-consumerist understanding of Couchsurfing, and their conceptions of friendship as instrumentality-free. The predominant idea that a 'good' friend acts without ulterior motives on behalf of the other (Allan 1989; Carrier 1999; Parry 1986) has been traced back to the early modern period, when sentiment, the intimate sharing of thoughts and 'emotionally persuasive communication' (Hutson 1997: 2) became the main topos of 'ideal' friendship among humanists (Hutson 1997; Lochman et al. [eds] 2011). This undermined conventional ideas of friendship in which the exchange of hospitality and material gifts were cornerstones of relationships, though gifts could also become non-material or 'symbolic'. Following this vein, most Western Couchsurfers do bring gifts for their Maghrebi hosts, such as little souvenirs from their home countries, miniature Eiffel Towers, bags showing the red Maple Leaf of the Canadian flag, key rings in the shape of the Colosseum in Rome, or food, mostly sweets, from people's native countries. Price tags are always removed so as to conceal the item's monetary value. In contrast, usual gifts among Maghrebis when invited are standardised and people tend to have a clear idea of their monetary value, which has to be known so that people can reciprocate on another occasion.<sup>9</sup>

In Tunisia, there are important similarities to widespread Moroccan notions of material exchange as comprising a central part of bonds of amity. This goes so far that Tunisian Arabic describes friends as persons who 'exchange favours' (*bnāthum mazāya*) (Abu-Zahra 1974: 125), which testifies to the centrality of reciprocity in friendship.<sup>10</sup> However, these understandings and practices are challenged by young people belonging to the upper-middle class, among them many Couchsurfers. What they try to do away with is the predominance of linking utilitarian considerations and friendship, of assuming the possibility (and normalcy) of inequality between partners in such 'friendships-cum-patronage'. I will illustrate these shifting understandings by focusing on two ethnographic examples, returning to chemist Lilia and introducing English teacher Latif.

As mentioned above, one reason why Lilia was happy about incoming foreign 'friends' through Couchsurfing is her dissatisfaction with possible 'local' forms of amity. At her desalination plant, she discounted all male employees as potential friends straight away. But even apart from this gender issue, she is wary of closeness with employees answering

to her in general. She would expect them to ‘exploit’ a potential friendship by not working conscientiously any more. That is why, she told me, she could not be friends with the only other woman working in her desalination plant, her twenty-three-year-old secretary. Lilia feels uncomfortable with the way ‘friendship’ and patronage can be closely intertwined, with Tunisians expecting the more powerful or privileged ‘friend’ to assist others in any way they can. She thereby rejects the concept of *wasta* (that is, the practice of relying on one’s connections to people in power, cf. Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993, 1994; Detzner 2003; Gardner 2010: 153–157), and celebrates utility-free relationships and meritocracy instead. Proudly declaring that she had been selected for her job on merit, she insisted that the decision to hire her had nothing to do with the fact that relatives of hers used to be senior politicians in the former government.

As with Lilia’s social ties, Latif’s friends are also remarkably socially homogenous in terms of social status, education and class background. This is noteworthy as he stresses at the same time that a ‘friend’, in his view, is someone valued independently of any publicly defined status, utility or gender. Friendship ignores these categories and brings together individuals who can ‘connect’ well with each other. Interestingly, Latif’s example shows how this social homogeneity among (local) friends does not contradict the continuous importance of some features of patron–client relationships, namely the insistence on strict reciprocity. As he put it, ‘There should not be any money issues between me and my friends.’ What he refers to here is that ‘real friends’ should not expect reciprocity. There is no money lending; you should give without expecting in return if you have a more secure income. Just as hospitality is often claimed to be devoid of expectations of return favours, friends, too, should be completely generous and not indebted to each other. For several participants like Latif, ‘real’ friends, in fact, turn their back on these conventions of strict reciprocity and would not anticipate getting money back. The common form of delayed, reciprocal exchange of objects at the heart of more distant social relationships should play no role among a small group of ‘best friends’.

In a similar way, Silver (1990: 1477) suggests that friendships in Europe are ‘diminished in moral quality if friends consciously monitor the balance of exchange between them, for this implies that the utilities friends offer each other constitute their relationship, rather than being valued as expressions of personal commitment’. Silver observes, nonetheless, that people in Europe are implicitly expected to remember who paid last time, so that they can take inviting in turns. In contrast, Latif (like many other Maghrebi members) would argue that it does not matter if it is constantly the same people who receive more than they give, if the receivers are in more difficult financial situations. Here, Latif would not suggest that both parties need to have similar social and financial backgrounds, but that it would go without saying that the richer friend pays. There is no need to create the illusion of equality in relationships qualified as friendships between unequal partners.

### *Conclusion*

Being conceived as distinct from socialising with people in one’s usual surrounding, friendship ties with Western foreigners carry different types of expectations and fascination. This article was devoted to the ethical controversies surrounding enactments

of hospitality and friendship with travellers. Focusing on material exchange, I hope to have demonstrated how the differently classed Moroccan and Tunisian Couchsurfing members understand the role of 'money issues' in friendship. At this point, I want to suggest three concluding remarks.

Among the less advantaged Moroccan members, moral reasoning about their friendships with foreign guests foregrounds a fundamental ambiguity that corresponds with wider perceptions of the many Moroccans who are not employed in the tourism industry but seek to make a living through 'informal contacts' with international tourists. As Bruner (1996) and several other authors have pointed out, the emerging creative intercultural spaces in tourism settings allow for considerable innovation. In the context of extreme inequality between partners, this experimentation is often an involuntary necessity rather than a joyful field of creative invention. Moral negotiations of relationships are often considered exhausting, in many cases leading to conflict and friction.

In Tunisia, the different social background of members eases these potential sources of conflict with foreign friends, without putting an end to them entirely. Indeed, many participants assume the impossibility of friendship with differently classed co-nationals and instead stress the closeness of their ties with their 'cosmopolitan Couchsurfing friends'. In extending amity across national, cultural and religious borders, nationality should not play a role, in their view. This reveals similarities with widespread Western readings of friendship as highly individualised relationships, an arena for 'personal agency that is central to modern notions of personal freedom' (Silver 1990: 1476). Couchsurfing not only fits in well with some 'home-grown' notions of amity among the Tunisian middle and upper classes, but it also further promotes some trends. The encounter with the social and cultural context of backpackers and discourses of anti-consumerism contribute to previously non-dominant practices and values to produce a model of a novel life-style option. In particular, Tunisian male participants sometimes justify their preference for Western partners in terms of their alleged disinterest in material objects and in strict reciprocity in exchange. Encounters with some foreign Couchsurfers who had sold all their belongings and had been travelling as 'drifters' for years, without clear destination, left a strong impression on local participants and supported their assumption about Westerners' idealism and disinterest in money.

A final point that I have suggested is that entertainment and self-narratives are at the core of friendship between many Maghrebi participants and their foreign guests. In local Couchsurfing relationships, the guest indeed becomes a 'friend'—in Tunisia more often than in Moroccan encounters. Guests matter to their hosts as individuals. Although there is an element of ostentation involved in many instances, local participants actually value the intimacy evolving between themselves and their guests, despite the fundamental inherent ambivalence in terms of utilitarian interests. Spending time with friends from abroad is not just performed on behalf of third parties. Foreign guests are important in themselves, not just in their role of being 'passed around' between locals, as Picard (2007) argued for Reunion Island.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There are no more recent data as Couchsurfing.org stopped publishing country-specific information in 2012.

<sup>2</sup> As Graburn (2013: 174) points out, there is a paradox in the way Couchsurfers expect their guests/hosts to be both ‘satisfactorily “the same” and “different”’. While commonalities and a certain degree of homogeneity are appreciated, it is alterity that constitutes the fascination of many encounters.

<sup>3</sup> Many Western Couchsurfers have more possibilities actively to decide who they want to meet (by browsing through members’ online profiles), terminating their contact with some, while staying in touch with others (Bialski 2008).

<sup>4</sup> The Couchsurfing website also offers a choice of these terms when adding another member as a ‘friend’ to one’s profile, with ‘Couchsurfing friend’ being the second loosest category, followed only by ‘acquaintance’. Among Tunisians, the distinction (real) ‘friends’ versus ‘Couchsurfing friends’ seems to parallel the oppositional coupling ‘guests’ versus ‘(only) Couchsurfers’, when people justify why their efforts as hosts are rather limited at times. These labels, too, imply the different nature of relationships for members.

<sup>5</sup> In Morocco, *guwwar* is the most widespread term for Western tourists. For information on its connotations and etymology cf. Buchberger (2011).

<sup>6</sup> In Buchberger (2013), I explore in more detail the assertion of these ties as affordances of belonging, of closeness to Europeans, even of imagined kinship.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis of the notions of ambassadorship and open-mindedness in Couchsurfing, see the recent collection edited by Picard and Buchberger (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Zied’s double bind recalls Marsden’s (2012) observations among Afghans who state they cannot afford to be generous any more in an environment of financial restraint where generosity has become the privilege of the well-to-do.

<sup>9</sup> The prices of most sweets, fruits and soft drinks, all popular small presents among Tunisian guests, are well known to all involved. In Morocco, it is a frequent practice to give sugar loaves when invited to *munāṣabāt*, that is, festive events such as weddings. In case of doubt about the monetary value of a present, people would ask the exact price and jot it down in a note book dedicated to this purpose, so as to be able to remember how much they owed that person when deciding which present to buy on the next occasion.

<sup>10</sup> The widespread idea that bonds of amity involve utilitarian interests is also expressed in some Tunisian proverbs, like ‘*Īla carefti, caref rebbi; w ilā ch’obt ac’āb el-r’ellāb*’ (If you wish for a relationship, start with God; if you wish for friends, choose people in power) (Dornier 2004: 48).

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