BOOK REVIEWS


Analyses of the Arab attitude towards history, their coming to terms with their own past and that of others, are no more a rarity. Nabih Amin Faris may be regarded as the doyen of such soul-searching intellectuals, closely followed by another professor from the American University of Beirut, Constantin Zurayq. It is to the credit of the traditionally Western orientated vanguard of Lebanon, mostly Christian, to have acted as pioneers in the exploits of Arab resurgence. The emergence of a no less articulate and thoroughly trained intelligentsia in the countries of the Maghreb (Tunis, Algeria, Morocco) deserves attention not only inasmuch as it complements what might otherwise be regarded as a somewhat one-sided minority venture, but also in its capacity as the voice of a community the experiences of which transcend those of the Arab Near and Middle East. In fact, one could argue that in certain ways the history, at least colonial history, and social fabric of the Maghreb shows more parallels to those of a number of states in Africa and Asia than to those of the Arab “heartlands”.

One of the most recent works to be taken special note of is a book in French by the Moroccan professor, Abdallah Laroui: *La crise des intellectuels arabes—traditionalisme ou historicisme*. Laroui has established himself as a writer of note through two previous works which were widely discussed among the intellectual elite both in the Maghrib and in Europe: *L’idéologie arabe contemporaine*, (1967) with a preface by a scholar of such stature as Maxime Rodinson, and *L’histoire du Maghreb—un essai de synthèse* (1970).

Essentially a vindication of what goes by the name of historicism, *The Crisis of Arab Intellectuals* starts with a stock taking of all the trends of revolt against this very 19th century liberal rationalism. The erudite author from Morocco is evidently distressed by the disproportionate echo such short-lived European minicurrents as anti-humanism, anti-rationalism, and anti-subjectivism find at Arab universities. Their society has not yet experienced the long-range benefits of a thorough penetration of rationality but Arab academicians, nonetheless, afford themselves the luxury of indulging in near fanciful researches on the “modernity” of their traditional lore. They do this by proving the affinity between a wide range of fashionable concepts and attitudes among Western intellectuals with comparable examples from the history of Muslim culture. Thus “religious philosophy”, presently a fad of many a Western scholar, has its parallel in *kalām* (the theology of Muslim scholastics; the preoccupation with mysticism in Italy, Germany, and France is boosted by ransacking the treasures of Ibn ‘Arabi, Suhrawardi, Mīr Dāmād, Mullā Ṣadrā and a host of other saints; the reversion from Marx to the “political philosophy” of Plato is buttressed by the resuscitation of al-Fārābī; revived “structural history” finds its paragon in Ibn Khaldūn; and the latest upsurge of “formal
logic” leads to the dusting of those numberless and voluminous commentaties written by Muslim ancestors on Aristotal and his band of followers.

Laroui goes on to enumerate several more such examples of rejuvenated disciplines, all apparently providing strong arguments against his own insistence on humanist rationalism and political realism, subsumed under the concept of historicism. Though he says that he does not want to discourage Arab investigators from undertaking such gratifying excursions into past glory, what really counts is his warning that the rejoicing in these glamorous feats of the forebears in no way secures the future. The relation of these undeniably impressive aspects of Muslim culture to our present day needs is minimal. Had the Arabs been a forgotten race, for centuries extinct, one could have taken just the same delight in the discovery of seemingly modern manifestations of their ancient culture. The “modernity” which is sought to be established for something long past is at best “naive”, as Hegel would have it. The same could be proved with regard to other cultures such as the Chinese or Indian. Laroui could not have gone amiss had he also mentioned the often fascinatingly “modern” cultures of the Incas, Mayas, and Aztecs.

While doing justice to the whole spectrum of recent tendencies in the West, the Moroccan Marxist questions the authoritativeness of these academic exercises in their capacity as workable philosophies or, at least, intellectual orientations leading to effective action, for the basic concern is to overcome cultural backwardness. Laroui discusses the relativity of the term “cultural lag” but has little doubt that he can maintain it as a proposition serving as leitmotif to his book. The fallacy of those Arab intellectuals, whose main effort is to update their heritage in tune with the sprouting tendencies of a fashion-conscious Western intelligentsia, is precisely that, with this craving for modernity, they believe they will be able to bridge the cultural gap. While doing so they overlook that they fall prey to something secondary and ephemeral, something that does not really affect the base of the modern world’s rationalist edifice. Be it USA or USSR, both are firmly rooted in the concept of history as progress, economic rationality, realism in politics, humanism and populism in literature and the arts, evolutionism in sociology etc. Whatever an intellectual vanguard in the industrialised countries may experiment with, it all proceeds from these historicist fundamentals of their educational systems, their social ethics, their economic organization, their home and foreign policy, as well as their popular literature. If this fact is not realized, Laroui seems to infer, Arab society could well suffer the same fate as Italy where there has been a similar chasm between “modern” or even futuristic intellectuals and the society as a whole which is still culturally lagging behind. The result is Italy’s economic and political backwardness.

Abdallâh Laroui who admits being deeply indebted to Lukacs and Gramsci, avers that Arab culture, in its classical expression as well as in the most influential of its contemporary manifestations, is opposed to the culture of liberalism on almost every score. Whatever eccentricism a bourgeois elite may display in proving a questionable modernity of its own, the problem of backwardness is bitterly felt by millions of Arabs in their daily lives. With this in view, Laroui endeavours to delineate the logical way out through historicism and rationality. However, he does betray sufficient modesty to emphasize that the perspective proffered by him holds good for little more than a teacher’s career, in other words, lingering and wearisome toil, without direct involvement in the
shaping of political destiny. In his order of priorities he reserves cultural and political creativity for a later stage, knowing full well that this stance will be hard to accept for those who have been impatiently waiting for the advent of an “Arab Spring”. Laroui is convinced that the promised reawakening is still a long way off.

It appears then that the Moroccan scholar views the nineteenth century breakthrough in rationalism (historicism) as something akin to the discovery of America: the world will never be the same again. Whatever shape things in America may adopt, its discovery and growing power influences the course of events everywhere. Trying to elucidate Laroui’s argument one could inveigh against the Arab bourgeoisie that their negation of the rational foundation of humanist liberalism for the sake of an artificially renovated tradition could be likened to those Spaniards who disbelieved Columbus even after the establishment of vice-regencies in Mexico and Peru. The Moroccan professor considers the Indians as most extreme in their rejection of rationality and projection of a spurious “modernity” back into the origins of Vedic culture. He makes no bones about his admiration for the way the Chinese have outgrown this pusillanimity and are now, at the hour of triumph, successes, displaying a striking humility, whereas the Indians, who are hampered by a kind of neurotic pride in their national heritage, have failed to make plausible the relevance of this ancient “modernity” of theirs by any corresponding contemporary achievements. (Though this was written before the atomic explosion in India it still holds true in view of the day by day deteriorating economic conditions.) The difference is obviously one between, in the one instance, taking the past as a source of moral inspiration, an esthetical or social ideal of epic nature and, in the other instance, attempts to restore ancient patterns of education, economy, judicature etc., to revive what is no more viable.

The author merely scratches the surface of these two examples, but it is evident that he holds the difference of economic systems responsible, for in a subsequent chapter he illustrates with the help of the Moroccan example, how dependence on economic tutelage is bound to prevent a rupture with the traditional order. In the case of Morocco as he sees it, there is only an illusion of political freedom because the economy is entirely manipulated from abroad. As a result the same constellation of political forces persists as under the colonial regime with the concomitant determination to keep a traditionalist structure alive.

Contrary to the commonly held view of tradition as something inert and solid, something that perpetuates itself and gives in only to concerted action against it, Laroui contends that tradition has no stability of its own and requires as much vigilant effort to sustain it as is demanded by a revolution aiming at the overthrow of an entrenched system. If, therefore, the post-independence elite in Morocco or elsewhere recoils into its long history of isolationist retrospection, it does so out of a kind of helplessness. The all-pervasive economic infringement is a continuation of that age-old menace from abroad, evoking responses that are by now almost hereditary. At present the elite visualizes no other means of countering, but the moment a concrete alternative indicates itself traditionalism will vanish without having to be combated.

The Marxist historian is convinced that the tradition upheld by the Moroccan elite in its self-defence does not express the true nature of the Maghrebi people. But the draker
the prospects of real self-determination, the stronger is the affirmation of tradition by an
elite who would otherwise feel no qualms in throwing it overboard, for that tradition has
no other appeal, it lacks the quality to generate genuine adherence to itself, except as a
temporary and facile method to bring about national cohesion as a kind of passive resis-
tance. Herein lies the strength and weakness of traditionalism, it can engender an in-
tractable fierceness while at the same time being susceptible to a sudden collapse, for the
moment it ceases to serve its present purpose it will crumble like a house of cards.

This inference has undoubtedly an air of oversimplification. However, one cannot but admit that the writer substantiates it fairly convincingly from the history of the
Moroccan nationalist movement which, in the past, experienced frequent fluctuations
between assertions of revolutionary rationalism and reversions into traditionalist obs-
curantism, depending on the degree of foreign encroachment. Here one is tempted to draw
d a comparison to strikingly similar phenomena in the Indo-Pak subcontinent. Roman-
ticist upheavals such as the Khilafat Movement in support of the tottering Ottomans
have been epitomized in a cute Urdu dictum as soda water kā udāl.

The Moroccan thinker's analysis ends on a not very optimistic note. The longer
the reliance on a domineering foreign economy, technology, and administration lasts,
and the deeper the social cleavage becomes, the stronger is the temptation to escape into
the illusion of irrational theories and mythical concepts, be they of religious or nationalist
or utopian provenance. The intensification of the cultural lag which this dilemma en-
tails increases the demands made on the revolutionary intellectual. To cope with the
deteriorating situation and finally to undo it he is required to be all the more profound in
consciousness and education as well as to be extra alert to the responsibility devolving
upon him, in accordance with the increasing need for total revolution, howsoever distant
and improbable the emergence of such a super-Arab with the stamina of a perfect revolu-
tionary may appear.

The Arab intellectual, so Laroui concludes, will not succeed in shaking off his
lamentable misery unless he takes to criticizing radically his own culture, language, and
tradition. If, at last, he wishes to bid farewell to the protracted Arab winter, he must,
first of all, learn how to state incisively and without any hesitation what are the prerequi-
sites of the incumbent radical rejuvenation, i.e., liberate himself from the chimerical
traditionalism that holds sway in one guise or the other, mostly either as religious
obscurantism or irrational chauvinism, and more often than not as both.

—Detlev Khalid

As its title indicates, this book by Mr. Aslam Siddiqi attempts to explain the challenges posed by modernization to the traditional thought and practice of the Muslims. It emphasises the failure of the ‘Ulamā to meet these challenges and calls upon the Muslims to exercise creative thinking in order to solve modern problems in the light of Islam. It also contains a forceful plea for the toleration of unorthodox thinking and the throwing open to a free national debate the great issues with which the Muslims are faced today.

Referring to the Pakistani commitment to order the national affairs in accordance with the Qur’ān and the Sunna, Mr. Aslam Siddiqi says that accommodation has to be found between ideology and reality. He complains that the Muslims are just imitating others and have developed a split personality not knowing how to relate their contemporary borrowings to Islamic principles and heritage. On the other hand, he is equally opposed to adopting ancient structural solutions of seemingly similar problems which have arisen in radically different social environments.

In the first chapter the author defines modernization as consisting in an attitude of mind which is dissatisfied with traditional ways of life. Social change is the hall-mark of modernization and economic growth its major achievement. The second chapter is entitled, “The Meaning of Revolutions”. It traces the emergence of the modern mind in the western world after successive intellectual, industrial and political revolutions. The third chapter is devoted to the Muslim reaction to these western revolutions which transformed the life and thought of the western man. In the opinion of Mr. Aslam Siddiqi the intellectual response of the Muslims to western thought and practice is mainly apologetic, old tools are used to solve new problems, which are transferred to an age where they did not exist and thus the whole effort to solve them is fruitless and mis-directed. He criticises Kamal Ataturk for lacking in intellectual restraints and deeper insights and for not realizing his own limitations.

The fourth chapter, “The Contemporary Islamic Society”, deals with the recent conditions in the Muslim world and the cultural onslaught on the Muslims from the West, from Soviet Russia and from the Bharati Hindu expansionism. He says that India declared herself a secular state but this secularism has not prevented it from returning to Hindu ways. A silent ceaseless effort goes on for Hinduising other cultures. Text books adopted for secular education in all schools bring out this policy clearly. In fact this fear of being Hinduized was the main reason why the demand for Pakistan gathered such an overwhelming force. Mr. Aslam Siddiqi should have added a few paragraphs for the analysis of the factors which led to the partition of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent.

In the seventh chapter on “The Fetters of Structures” Mr. Aslam Siddiqi complains that Muslims have chosen the divisive aspects of nationalism which is opposed
to the Islamic spirit. While others are preparing for one world or the global village, Muslims are cutting themselves into small slices; so they become easy to absorb.

In the eighth chapter on "Changing Environments and Adaptive Systems", which is much too technical for a layman, Mr. Aslam Siddiqi criticizes the popular prescription "Back to the Qur'ān" and "Back to the Sunna". He says that this cannot mean going back to the days of the prophet, which is just not possible, for no one can wish away the intervening centuries and the deposits of history. The criticism is only partially justified. There is a vital sense in which we can go back to the days of the prophet, if we mean by this that we can capture the spirit of the Qur'ān and the Sunna and the values they uphold.

The chapter on the Islamic Framework refers to the social legislation of the second caliph, 'Umar, to prove the thesis that under changed social conditions, it becomes necessary to revise and modify the legislation of the past, while retaining its spirit and sticking to its objectives. This chapter leaves a sense of inadequacy and we hope that in the next edition Mr. Aslam Siddiqi will do some further elaboration and quote more instances where 'Umar took independent decisions to meet new situations. But it must be made clear that in these decisions 'Umar the second caliph was not in any way contravening the principles of Islam but implementing them in a more effective manner.

In the tenth chapter on the Concept of Knowledge, the author refers to the failure of early Muslims to observe Nature directly and employ other methods of interpreting the Qur'ān, besides the Sunna, the Hadith and History. He is of opinion that Muslim knowledge was mainly dependent on deduction. Finally, he comes to the conclusion that a blend of the deductive and inductive approaches seems necessary for the Muslims to qualify as the "midmost people".

In the chapter on "The Creative Group", Mr. Aslam Siddiqi pleads for the formation of an elite in the Muslim world who would consist not only of the 'Ulamā' but also of distinguished people drawn from other walks of life, who would guide the community along right lines. In my humble opinion a new class of 'Ulamā' should be raised which is well-versed in modern social sciences along with the traditional religious sciences. It is only this group of people who can properly function as the guides of the community.

In this chapter Mr. Aslam Siddiqi also pleads for the study of sub-cultures of different groups. He says that Islam is a supra-culture. What he means perhaps is that different regional cultures cannot claim autonomy and independence of Islam. But he has not made this point very clear. It is necessary to do so in the light of recent controversies on the subject.

On the whole, Mr. Aslam Siddiqi has written a good book which is recommended to all those who are thinking on the problems of the Muslims in the modern world.

Mazheruddin Siddiqi

This Bibliography of the Bibliographies, a handy and useful aid for those working on the history and economics of Egypt and the Sudan is published by the American Institute of Islamic Studies, Denver. The compiler of this guide is working in the Department of History, University of Denver, Denver.

Basically it is a part of a larger guide being prepared by the author as a bibliography of the bibliographies on the Muslim Peoples. The primary purpose in presenting this guide as a separate work, as stated by the author, is to enable those whose interests lie predominantly with both countries to have readily available in small format an inexpensive, yet fairly comprehensive bibliography on those countries.

This annotated bibliography deals with a particular period beginning with the French invasion of Egypt and extending to the present age.

The guide treats with the bibliographies published in Arabic, English, French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish and Turkish on the subjects pertinent to economics and culture, etc. covering the period since 1798. All entries are arranged in alphabetical order according to authors, with explanatory and analytical annotations. At the end it has an index of authors, titles, journals, institutions and subjects, which has made this bibliography more useful.

It may be noticed, however, that literature on Egypt and the Sudan in the original language (Arabic) of the two countries could not get due share as it has only nine such entries out of 135. It fails to mention some very important bibliographies such as Marājiʿ mā nushira baʿd al-Ḥarab al-ʿUzmāʾ an buldān al-intidāb fi al-Sharaq al-adnā 1919-1930.

Curiously enough the Unesco publications are also missing in this bibliography. Saʿd Muhammad al-Hijrasi: *al-Dalil al-bibliographic lil marājiʿ biʾl-ʿalam al-ʿArabi*. Cairo, Unesco, 1965 is very much related to the subject this bibliography claims to deal with.

The form of entries used in this guide for Muslim names of this region needs improvement. Instead of the form of entry for European names, a more suitable and appropriate form of entries for the names of this particular area and peoples is the one which has been adopted in most of the Arab Countries as well as others in this region. This form is explained in the preface of *Monthly Bulletin of Legal Archives Depositary* published by National Library and Archives of the Arab Republic of Egypt. In this depositary Muslim names belonging to pre-eighteenth Century A.D. are entered under the most famous part of their name, then follow the rest of the names. Names belonging
to post-eighteenth Century are entered in complete form in the usual order e.g. Ibrāhīm al-Ibyārī, Zākī Najīb Mahmūd, Yūnus Aḥmad Baṭriq etc. To illustrate, the entry no. 13 in this bibliography should have been written as Muhammad ben Chenab instead of the present form: ben Chenab, Muhammad.

The mode of transliteration is not uniform and standardized. For instance a minor blemish is the entry no. 135, which should have been written as Mā Sāhama bihi al-Mu'arrikhūn al-'Arab... whereas the compiler has written it as Mā Sāhim bihu al-Mu'arrikhun al-'Arab...which is meaningless.

—AHMAD KHAN