
This book comprises five major essays published by the author in French in 1989. The issues and questions raised here are characteristic of the post-colonial intellectual climate of North Africa in particular, and the Third World in general. El-Kenz commences his argument by offering helpful insights into the nature and function of the post-independence Algerian intelligentsia and its relationship to both power and society. This book is, definitely, one of the few studies by an Arab author who discusses at length and in highly sophisticated manner the contemporary concerns and worries of the Arab intelligentsia. El-Knez builds his entire argument on the basis of the dramatic changes and upheavals that the Algerian intelligentsia has faced since Independence, in 1961. He maintains that before Independence, the Algerian intelligentsia “played an important role in the formation of a nationalist culture necessary for the development of the national liberation movement” (p. 12). The Algerian University was the main intellectual breeding ground for such an intelligentsia. Also, the author notes correctly that after Independence, the indigenous university, as any other Third World university, was in a rush to “produce as many graduates as possible”, who, in turn, were not absorbed by the society properly in terms of jobs and personal fulfillment. El-Kenz uses the term, “loss of hegemony” to describe this crucial situation. That means that whereas the intelligentsia before Independence was more or less organic, in that it was able to put up with the intellectual and political hegemony of the foreign ruling class, it failed to articulate the same interests after Independence because of a major shift in the situation. The Algerian intelligentsia in the post-Independence stage experienced a loss of hegemony because the army, the main military and political force in society, was content to capitalize on its successes against the colonizer. Furthermore, and this is unique to North Africa, the Algerian intelligentsia, that was mainly French-educated, experienced a second level of “loss of hegemony” as a result of the policy of Arabization. The intelligentsia found itself unable to express a collective meaning in its mother tongue that had been almost banished from the cultural discourse of Algeria during the many years of colonialism.

We must note, however, that the author’s main aim is to study the
evolution and dilemma of the indigenous secular intelligentsia. The author, although he maintains that a traditional intelligentsia class, i.e. Muslim intelligentsia, was not at all absent in colonial Algeria, focusses his attention on the secular intelligentsia and thus neglects to examine the evolution and dilemmas of the traditional intelligentsia. This observation gains more significance especially when examined against the recent events in Algeria with the banning of the activities of the different Islamist groups and the jailing of thousands of Islamist activists. The inevitable question here concerns the social and professional formation of the intelligentsia of the Islamic movement in contemporary Algeria, and the fact that the tremendous upsurge of events in Algeria in the 1980s was not predicted or even analysed. The author attempts a faint answer at the end of the book.

The author highlights the plight of the Algerian intelligentsia in the 1960s and 1970s. He maintains that because of the massive changes in Algerian society at the level of politics, culture, and economy, the intelligentsia, as the most conscious group in society, did bear the brunt, and that, to a large extent, the second-generation intelligentsia felt neglected by the state, and consequently, “the intellectuals took refuge in the silence of the embassies and factories” (p. 26).

El-Kenz utilizes Gramscian concepts effectively in his analysis of the intellectual environment of contemporary Algeria, but reaches grim conclusions. The intelligentsia is at a loss about what to do. The comfortable dichotomization of the intelligentsia into modern and traditionalist is no longer helpful in discussing the cultural milieu of the modern Third World.

What about the resurgence of Islam in Algeria? El-Kenz elaborates on the ideological underpinnings of Islamic resurgence without considering it a response to the overall failure of the nationalist experiment after Independence. He is overwhelmed by its tantalizing presence in Algerian society. Therefore, he argues that Islamic resurgence is a socio-religious phenomenon that seeks with fierce vigour to substitute the social, political, and moral status quo with a multidimensional Islamic system, that admits of no distinctions between politics, society, religion, and culture. ‘Modern Arab ideology’, to use a phrase coined by the Moroccan philosopher, Abdallah Laroui (see his two major critiques of the intellectual history of the modern Arab world, especially North Africa: L’Ideologie arabe contemporaine and the Crisis of the Arab Intelligentsia), has not been able to free itself from religion, i.e., Islam. “The religious foundations of contemporary Arab ideology are certainly evidence of crisis in the society; at the same time they reveal the ideological nature of the foundations of our rationalism” (p. 103). However, one has to make certain clarifications. The religious discourse and the ‘fundamentalist’ discourse are far from synonymous. We cannot ascribe
monolithic values to the religious phenomenon, especially Islam, and, analyt-
ically speaking, the ‘fundamentalist’ phenomenon is just one tendency
amongst many. “Popular Islam” and “orthodox Islam”, to use the author’s
terminology, differ in their political and social conceptualizations from the
‘fundamentalist’ tendency. That is why one often witnesses a clash between
the ‘fundamentalist’ and ‘Orthodox’ camps. It is important to heed the
author’s advice that there is an urgent educational need to devote time and
energy to the field of the critical study of religion, be it sociologically- or
theologically- or philosophically-oriented.

Furthermore, there is a tendency in the Western press, at least, to
exaggerate the political power of Islamic resurgence. There is a parallel
tendency amongst some nationalist and leftist intellectuals in the Arab world
to exaggerate its cultural, religious, and political presence. The author keeps
stressing, and rightly so, that Islamic resurgence is not a reified abstraction,
but a social movement that is bound with society. Its strength or weakness
depends, to a large extent, on the social and economic promises that the
modern nation-state in the Arab and Muslim world can deliver to the masses.

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