

Author's Introduction

To Seek Our Modernity by Rethinking Our Tradition (*turath*)

Voices are clamoring here and there to question, in one way or another, the Arab researchers' concern over tradition: why all the interest in tradition? Is this not an intellectual regression? Some even go as far as referring to a pathological phenomenon, a "collective neurosis" that suddenly hit Arab intellectuals following the 1967 debacle, and caused them to turn backwards in the direction of "tradition." Those who hold such an opinion raise the objection that the interest in the topic of "tradition" diverts minds from the exigencies of modernity. Under their delusion, they believe that the Arab-Islamic tradition, and for that matter any other tradition, is nothing but an object from the past that should be conveniently relegated into the past, and its study carefully reserved—if ever deemed useful—for the sole care of those rare scholars who specialize in things of the past. Interest in tradition should in this case remain cloistered within the walls of academic institutions or the pages of specialized journals. In other words, the "superfluous" interest in tradition of Arab intellectuals would inevitably express itself at the expense of their interest in "modernity."

But I believe that this point of view does not sufficiently take into account the specificity of those problems posited within Arab culture. Indeed, what makes the latter quite distinct, from the time of "codification," or recording, (*'asr al-tadwin*)¹ to the present time, is the fact that its internal dynamics does not express itself in the production of new discursive forms but rather in the reproduction

of the old. Beginning in the seventeenth century of the hijra, this reproductive activity was interrupted, giving way to a state of inertia, of withdrawal and of repetition. Since then, a certain notion of—what I have called—“an understanding of tradition confined within tradition” settled into the Arab-Islamic culture and is prevalent to this day. Under these conditions, modernity would perhaps consist in going beyond this understanding of tradition that is confined within tradition, in order to establish a modern understanding and a contemporary view of tradition. Modernity, therefore, is not to refute tradition or break with the past, but rather to upgrade the manner in which we assume our relationship to tradition at the level of what we call “contemporaneity,” which, for us, means catching up with the great strides that are being made worldwide. True, modernity must find the substantiation of its theses within its own discourse, the discourse of contemporaneity, but must not be a “fundamentalism” that clings to some inspiring sources/foundations. Alas, modernity in contemporary Arab thought has not gone that far yet. It remains limited—in the conception of its theses—to getting its inspiration from European modernity, from which it draws the rationale and the “foundations” to its discourse. Now, even if we admit that European modernity currently represents “universal” modernity, its very membership within the specific cultural history of Europe—even as a figure of opposition—makes European modernity incapable of analyzing Arab cultural reality, whose history was shaped far away from it. European modernity is foreign to Arab culture and to its history and could not possibly establish a dialogue that is likely to trigger a movement in its midst. Since European modernity can only engage Arab culture from the outside, it thus pushes its adversary into withdrawal and confinement. This is why our aspiration toward modernity must by necessity base itself on those components of the critical mind that are present within the Arab culture itself, in order to trigger an internal dynamics of change. Modernity, therefore, means first and foremost to develop a modern method and a modern vision of tradition.

We could thus rid our conception of tradition from that ideological and emotional charge that weighs on our conscience and forces us to perceive tradition as an absolute reality that transcends history, instead of perceiving it in its relativity and its historicity.

What is going to ensure the specificity of our modernity will therefore be that part which it will play within contemporary Arab culture. It is indeed its ability to fulfill this part which will make of it a truly "Arab modernity." In fact, there is not *one* single absolute, universal and planetary modernity; rather, there are *numerous* modernities that differ from era to era and from place to place. In other words, modernity is an historical phenomenon, and as such, it remains conditioned by the circumstances within which it manifests itself, and confined within the space-time limitations defined by its *becoming* throughout history. Modernity must therefore differ according to each space and each historical experience, e.g., European modernity is different from either Chinese modernity or Japanese modernity. If in Europe they have come to speak of post-modernism, it is because the very phenomenon of modernity had ceased by the end of the nineteenth century. Modernity was an historical stage born of the Age of Enlightenment (the eighteenth century), which was itself born following the Renaissance (the sixteenth century).

The situation in the Arab world is quite different. Here, the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment and modernity are not successive periods that surpass one another; rather, they are intertwined and coexist well within the contemporary era whose beginnings go back about one hundred years. When we speak of modernity, we must not therefore understand it as do the European intellectuals and researchers for whom modernity is a stage that represents the transcending of the Age of Enlightenment and of the Renaissance, the latter having in fact flourished thanks to the "resurrection" of the "tradition" of Antiquity and thanks to a particular way of subscribing to this tradition. Modernity, as it manifests itself in our present situation, is at the same time the Renaissance, the Age of



Enlightenment and the *transcending* of these two periods. All expressions of modernity will have to be centered around rationality and democracy. These two principles are not merely borrowed objects but concrete practices that answer to specific rules. As long as we have not applied rationality to our own tradition, exposed the sources and denounced the manifestations of despotism in this tradition, we will most assuredly remain incapable of building a modernity of our own through which we can engage in the “universal” modernity, no longer as patients but as agents.

A number of people who extol modernity may object that, as far as they are concerned, “universal modernity” as such is like a presence that derives its norms from itself. Though I doubt very much that such a situation, i.e., that of an intellectual who would live a modernity that would only derive its norms from within itself—is even possible, we would conceivably allow such a thesis if the question was only to resolve individual problems. Speaking in this fashion, this intellectual is thinking according to his own criteria and is narrowing down the problem to the data of his personal experience. Some might judge this position to be in effect a modernist one in so far as modernity consecrates individuality as a value in itself, that modernity is “individualistic.” Unfortunately, this is a false conception of modernity, for if it were the case, these intellectuals would not even feel the need to criticize the interest of others in tradition. They would have no need for the “other” if modernity were in fact purely individualistic.

In fact, modernity can be an individual position only in as far as it is tied to a rise of the critical mind and of creativity within a given culture and in so far as these two activities are performed by individuals as such and not as representatives of the group. By the same token, modernity is not a negative attitude, nor is it an attitude of withdrawal and retirement within oneself. Despite the status it confers on the individual as a value in and of itself, modernity is therefore not an end in itself. It happens of necessity for the sake of some-



one other than the self and in view of all the phenomena of the culture from which it has emerged. Modernity for the sake of modernity is an absurd idea. Modernity is a message and an impetus of change aimed at reviving mentalities, the norms of thinking and of appreciation. Now, since the dominant culture with which we are confronted is a traditional culture, it is above all towards tradition that the modernism discourse must be directed, so that we can effect a rereading of it and from it create a modern-day vision. Only in this way, will the modernist discourse be able to affect the large majority of the educated population, perhaps even the population as a whole, and thus fulfill its mission. As to the narcissist retirement within oneself, it can only lead to a suicidal exile and to self marginalization.

Some of our local intellectuals who claim “modernity” invoke democracy but they manage to reduce its magnitude to the mere demand of individual freedom. Simultaneously, these very persons reject rationality because it imposes “order” and puts limits on freedom. By so doing, they simply imitate certain trends of the European modernity, unaware, or pretending to be unaware, of the enormous gap that separates our condition from that of the West. It is true that in the industrialized West, rationalism has invaded and taken over all facets of individual and collective life, singly dominating human relations, the conception of the world, thought and behavior. The effects of a rational organizing of the economy, the bureaucracy, the state-apparatus, and the institutions ended up being reflected in the totality of the individual and the collective existence. The technological and computer revolutions have imposed their systematic character on all aspects of human life, thus seriously infringing upon the ethical specificity of man, perhaps even his specificity as a free being, or rather, of a being whose freedom is conditioned by his performance. Furthermore, Western rationalism has, in numerous domains, gone beyond the bounds of its own principles. It provided science and technology—which from the very



rationalist point of view should have been made to serve human freedom and the right of nations (human rights)—with incredible tools for mass destruction and for the extermination of individuals, and further enabled these tools to increase and diversify their performance. Hence, the natural and justifiable human reaction, from the viewpoint of modernity, was to rise against this irrational absurdity that culminates at the of peak of modern rationalism. This revolt led some, very often for personal reasons—such as their failure of self affirmation within society—to drift away with mystical, religious or atheistic currents which made them adopt hostile positions against all forms of rationality.

Among those of us who have claimed modernity, some have espoused this irrationalist position, for the same reasons previously given, while nothing in the Arab reality can justify it. Today, the Arab world indeed suffers from the hegemony of another type of irrationality, one that is totally different from Europe's irrationalism that resulted from the European rationalism. It is a medieval irrationality, with all the consequences it implies, namely the persistence of the relationship of governor-governed where the latter, reduced to the condition of a herd, proceed with their intellectual and social lives under their shepherd's staff. Only rationalism can stand, as an effective weapon, against this backward irrationality. How do we achieve modernity without the help of reason and rationality? How do we achieve a renaissance without the help of a renewed reason? Hostility to and attacks against rationalism, in a situation like ours, can only be inspired by an irrational obscurantism. He who engages in such obscurantism inevitably condemns himself to blindness. Reason is a beacon that we must not only light in the middle of darkness but also learn to carry around well into broad daylight.

This is the conception of modernity that we ought to define in light of our present. Modernity is above all rationality and democracy. A rational and critical approach to all aspects of our exist-



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ence—of which tradition emerges as one of the aspects that is most present and most rooted in us—is the only true modernist option. Our concern with tradition is therefore dictated by the necessity to elevate our approach to tradition to the level of modernity, in order to serve modernity and to give it a foundation within our “authenticity.”

¹ This refers to the period (AH second & third centuries/ AD eighth & ninth centuries) when Muslim scholars took to the systematic codification (*taḍwīn*) of their transmitted knowledge, e.g., prophet's sayings (*ḥadīth*), juridical tradition, exegeses (*tafsīr*), grammar, pre-Islamic and Islamic historical traditions, etc.