

**PART ONE**  
**A DIFFERENT READING**  
**OF THE TRADITION DISCOURSE**

**Chapter I**  
**The Present Shortcomings**

**The Fundamentalist Reading**

“How do we regain the greatness of our civilization? How do we resuscitate our tradition?” These two questions closely overlap and, in their interference, make up one of the three major axes around which revolves the problematics of modern and contemporary Arab thought.

The dialogue surrounding this axis and the dialectical order that it implies are set between the past and the future. As for the present, it is not present, not only because we refuse it, but also because the past is very much present to the point that it infringes upon the future and absorbs it. Acting as the present, the past is conceived as a means to affirm and to rehabilitate one’s identity.

The main reason that modern Arab consciousness affirms itself in this way is perfectly known and acknowledged. It concerns the challenge of the Western world in all its shapes. This identity affirmation, as would be the case for any individual or any society, has taken the form of a retreat to backward positions that would serve as ramparts and as defense positions. Such is the attitude held by the fundamentalist view of modern and contemporary Arab thought. This view, more than any other, sets out to resuscitate tradition, which it invested within the perspective of an heavily ideological reading, which aims at projecting a “radiant” future—fabricated by ideology—upon the past and, by the same token, “demonstrating” that “what took place in the past could be achieved in the future.”

Originally, this view appeared as a religious and political movement—both reformist and tolerant: that of Jamal al-Din Afghani<sup>1</sup> and of Muhammad ‘Abduh<sup>2</sup>. This movement called for renewal (*tajdid*) against “imitative conformism” (*taqlid*). The rejection of imitative conformism must be herein understood with a particular meaning: i.e., “to eliminate” a whole apparatus of knowledge, of methods and of concepts inherited from the “era of decline” while being careful not to “be caught in the toils” of Western thought. As for “renewal,” it was meant to create a “new” interpretation of the dogma and of the religious laws that rest directly upon the foundations of Islam. It was a question of actualizing *religion*, to make it contemporary and to make of it the substance of our renaissance.

It is this fundamentalist movement that brandished the banner of “authenticity” (*asala*), of one’s attachment to the roots and the defense of one’s identity, notions that must mean Islam itself: “the true Islam,” not the Islam presently practiced by Muslims.

We are, therefore, concerned with a polemical ideological reading that was justifiable at the time when it was indeed a means to affirm one’s identity and to reestablish confidence. It is an expression of the usual defense mechanism and would perhaps continue to be legitimate, provided it remained a part of the global effort of catching up with the times. In fact, quite the opposite occurred. The means became the end: hastily reconstructed to serve as a jumping board to “glory,” the past became the *raison d’être* for the renaissance project. Henceforth, the future would somehow become subjected to a reading that used the past as a tool of interpretation, not the past that actually took place, but “the past as it should have been.” But since such past existed nowhere else but in the imagination and the affective domain, the concept of the future-to-come was always unable to distance itself from the representation of the future-past. The fundamentalist lives in this representation with all his heart, not just as a romantic ideal, but also as a live reality. We would thus find him resuscitating ideological tensions from the past and implicating



himself in them body and soul with the fervor of a militant. Not satisfied with adversaries from the past, he goes looking for some even into the present and the future.

The fundamentalist reading of tradition is an ahistorical one and can only provide one type of understanding of tradition: an understanding of tradition that is locked inside tradition and absorbed by a tradition that it cannot in return include: it is tradition repeating itself.

The reading of the religious fundamentalists proceeds from a religious conception of history. This conception treats history as a moment that is expanded into the present, a time that is stretched inside the affective life, a witness to the perpetual struggle and the eternal suffering endured for the sake of affirming one's identity. And since we are told that it is both faith and religious conviction that define this identity, fundamentalism posits the spiritual factor as the sole engine of history. As for the other factors, they are considered as secondary, depending upon the spiritual, or disfiguring the "true" course of history.

### The Liberal Reading

"How do we live our era? How do we assume our relationship to tradition?" These are two other questions that equally overlap closely to make up, through their interference, the second axis around which revolves the problematics of modern and contemporary Arab thought. The debate around this axis and the dialectical order it implies *are set* this time between the present and the past. Not at all our own present but the Western European present which asserts itself as a "subject-ego" through which we view our era and all humankind, and therefore constitutes the "substance" of any possible future. This course of action ends up being projected on our very past and imprinting its mark on it.

The Arab liberal perception of the Arab-Islamic tradition stems from the present that it lives in, i.e., that of the West. The liberal reading is therefore European-style, which means that it adopts a European frame of reference and hence sees in tradition only what the Europeans see in it.

It is this group that espouses the orientalist discourse whose influence has been far reaching among certain Arab academics and has instilled in them an orientalist *habitus*. Its followers claim to support the scientific method, objectivity and "strict" neutrality. This reading insists that it is "disinterested" and "without any ideological intentions whatsoever."

The upholders of this *habitus* claim to be interested only in understanding and in knowledge: if indeed they do borrow the "scientific" method from the orientalists, they firmly reject their ideology. But when they say this, they forget, or pretend to forget, that along with the method they also adopt the vision. After all, are vision and method not inseparable?

The viewpoint of the orientalist method consists in confronting cultures, in reading one tradition through another. Hence the philological method which claims to bring everything back to its "origin." When it comes to reading the Arab-Islamic tradition, we would simply reconstruct it back to its Jewish, Christian, Persian, Greek, Indian, (and other) "origins."

The orientalist reading claims to want only to understand, nothing more. But what does it really seek to understand? Does it seek to understand to what extent the Arabs have "understood" the "glorious heritage" of their predecessors? Why? Is it because the contribution of the Arabs, who were the intermediaries between the Greek and the modern (European) civilizations, had no value other than having played this role? The future in the Arab past having consisted in the assimilation of a foreign past (mostly Greek Culture) into the Arab past, hence by analogy, the future in the Arab "be-



coming” should consist in its assimilation into the European present-past.

The modernist theses of the contemporary and modern Arab liberal thinking thus voice a dangerous identity alienation, not only that identity which is deep-rooted in a backward present, but also, and this is even worse, the identity that carries history and civilization.

### The Marxist Reading

“How do we achieve our revolution? How do we restore our tradition?” These again are two questions that closely overlap and constitute, through their interference, the third and last of those main axes around which revolves the problematics of modern and contemporary Arab thought.

The debate around this axis and the dialectical order that it implies are set between the future and the past. But this is true only because both are still at the planning stage: i.e., the plan for a revolution yet to be achieved and the plan to restore a tradition capable of prodding the revolution and of becoming its foundation.

The relationship here is a dialectical one: we expect revolution to enable us to restore our tradition, and we expect tradition to contribute to our revolution. The thinking of the modern Arab left still wanders inside this vicious circle, searching for a “method” and attempting to come out.

Why?

Because it does not follow the dialectical method as a method *to be applied*, but as one that is *already applied*, whereby the Arab-Islamic cultural heritage “would have” to be the reflection of class struggle, on the one hand, and an arena of confrontation between materialism and idealism, on the other. The task of the leftist reading would hence consist in pointing out the parties involved in this double conflict and in defining their (respective) positions. Realiz-



ing its inability to accomplish its task as it "should," the leftist thinking, worried and troubled, begins to blame the situation on "the absence of a true narrative of Arab history," or to rationalize the difficulty to analyze the extreme complexity that characterizes the events of our history. Nevertheless, if some adherents to this movement insist on arbitrarily minimizing these difficulties, it is at the price of tracing historical reality over theoretical schema. Thus, unable to detect traces of a "class struggle" within this history, they invoke "historical conspiracy" and when they cannot find any scientific "materialism" in it, they then speak of an immature materialism.

This reading of the Arab-Islamic tradition by the Arab "left" leads, as a result, to a Marxist fundamentalism. It is an attempt to borrow from the founding fathers of Marxism their ready-made dialectical method, as if the goal were to prove the soundness of the ready-made method instead of applying it.

This is the reason why this reading has proven to be hardly productive.

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<sup>1</sup> Jamal al-Din Afghani (died 1897). Born in Asadabad, Iran. After pursuing traditional religious studies, he went on numerous voyages throughout the whole world. He lived in Egypt where he exerted a major influence over the local intelligensia among whom he counted a disciple by the name of Muhammad 'Abduh. He was the founder of a reformist and modernist trend that was dedicated to the emancipation of the Muslim world. This movement came to be known as the *salafi* (or those who go back to the forefathers). According to him, the ultimate "takeoff" [of this movement] was to result from a combination of the positive contributions of European modernity and a purified Islamic tradition.

## The Present Shortcomings

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905). Born in Mahallat Nasr, Egypt. After studying at the religious university of Al-Azhar, he launched his reform movement at the instigation of Afghani. He stood against the reactionary theologians and gathered many disciples around him. He became grand mufti of Egypt and reformed the religious instruction at Al-Azhar by introducing modern disciplines.



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