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### Publication Date

2012

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Political Subjectivity in Contemporary Arab Thought:

The Political Theory of Abdullah Laroui, Hassan Hanafi, and Mohamed Abed al-Jabiri

by

Yasmeeen Samy Daifallah

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of

the requirements for a

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Political Science

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Critical Theory

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Wendy Brown, Chair

Professor Saba Mahmood

Professor Shannon Stimson

Fall 2012



Abstract

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by

Yasmeen Samy Daifallah

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Wendy Brown, Chair

This dissertation is an examination of the work of three twentieth century Arab thinkers and the significance of their thought to questions of political subjectivity and consciousness in political theory. The project analyzes the *oeuvres* of the Moroccan historian Abdullah Laroui, the Egyptian philosopher Hassan Hanafi, and the Moroccan philosopher Mohamed Abed al-Jabiri for the purpose of understanding how contemporary critiques of Arab-Islamic cultural heritage and ideology constitute a political theoretical tradition aimed at reforming the Arab political subject. Each thinker locates the consciousness of “the Arab self” at the heart of the troubled “Arab condition;” each conceives social and political progress as dependent upon the transformation of that consciousness. Thus, I argue that much of what usually passes as “cultural critique” in contemporary Arab thought should rather be considered as a critical examination of the formation of the Arab self carried out in the registers of cultural history, revisionist theology and ideology critique.

By examining three quite different intellectual figures, I am able to show that the trend to identify the Arab self as the locus of Arab political problems, and to critique that self through an examination of the Arab-Islamic cultural tradition, is not limited to any single ideological current, but is practiced across contemporary Arab political thought. What varies among these thinkers is how they diagnose, characterize and attempt to redress this tradition. Whereas Laroui’s critique culminates in a call for rupture with the tradition, Hanafi attempts its reconstruction and Jabiri offers a deconstruction aimed at sifting out and making use of its potentially progressive elements. Common to these various mobilizations of historical tradition is a modernist conception of history as necessarily progressive and as driven by a subject capable of shaping the future. Thus I argue that these thinkers and contemporary Arab thought more generally, inhabit an understanding that is counter-colonial but not yet postcolonial, one that is aware of the historicity of the Arab self and the profound influence of colonialism on its formation, yet is absent any critique of universalist and other conceits of Western modernity and democracy.

*To the light of my eyes...*  
*Noor and Mohammad*

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## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my chair, Professor Wendy Brown, for being a nurturing mentor, an extremely supportive adviser, and a true role model for me, as for many others, throughout the past seven years. Professor Brown had not only taught me about political theory in new and eye-opening ways, she had also taught me what it means to be a true teacher and a committed scholar. This project would not have been possible without her unfailing encouragement and intellectual engagement. I am thoroughly indebted to her generosity of time, intellect and spirit.

I would also like to thank Professor Saba Mahmood for opening my eyes to postcolonial theory, and for continuously alerting me to the implications of postcolonial critique for my work. I would have not gone down the path of studying Arab thought had it not been for her guidance and motivation. I am also very grateful for Professor Shannon Stimson's close and attentive reading of my writing, and her insightful engagement with my work.

Professor Nezar AlSayyad's input, guidance, and encouragement had been key to this project since its inception. Though not a member of my dissertation committee, Professor AlSayyad had consistently read, commented upon, and supported my work. His extensive knowledge of the intellectual terrain of modern Arab thought had been a crucial source of insight for my dissertation work. Professor Omnia El Shakry's feedback and discussion of my work had likewise been extremely helpful in teaching me how to think historically, and how to argue better and stronger. To my first and ultimate mentor, Heba Raouf Ezzat, I owe a great debt, the least of which is her planting the first seeds for this project. I also thank Ibrahim Arafat, who first led me to political science, and never ceased to encourage me since. This project would have not been possible without the generous financial support of the Department of Political Science, the Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory, and the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, at UC Berkeley.

For sustenance, both intellectual and psychological, throughout the past seven years, I owe my friends Nazanin Shahrokni, Rana Mroue, and Georgia Mavrodi. Nazanin had kept my company many a work night throughout the past year, and was always there with her soothing presence. Rana always gave me perspective when I lacked it (which was often!) and, though thousands of miles away, Georgia had never been distant. I am grateful to Safa Gasser and Hadeel Etman for keeping me strong, and to Ali Bond for her caring friendship.

I am greatly indebted to my mom and dad, whose belief in me never faltered and who lifted me up each time I was down, and to my brothers, whose sense of humor lightened up even the heaviest moments. The greatest debt of all I owe to Mohammad, my one and only, who gently and patiently bore with me when I was unbearable, who nourishes my soul and makes me a better person. To him, and to my little light, Noor, I dedicate this work.





**Chapter I**  
**Introduction:**  
**Finding the Political in Contemporary Arab Thought**

**I. The Question:**

In his critique of Arab ideology, Mohamed Abed al-Jabiri (1982) bemoans the lack of a tradition of political theorizing in modern Arab thought. He identifies a need for a body of thought that “theorizes the relationship between the citizen and political authority...or, more generally, between society and the state, from the perspective of the question of authority” (59). According to this formulation, Arab thought since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century has offered little in the way of defining the different “modalities of political rule” and the relationship between the “citizen and the state” that these modes entail (60-1). Instead, Jabiri posits, modern Arab thought has chosen to attack political questions indirectly, examining the problems of the political present by referring to the historical past; reading in that past a form to be emulated, a persistent source of problems that should be parted with, or some blend of both.

Jabiri is right to observe that contemporary Arab thought has seldom theorized the state, and that it often harks back to the cultural and political “pasts” to make arguments about the political present. Jabiri is wrong, however, to delimit the field of political theory to the study of “authority” and its entailments, and therefore, to argue that little if any “political theory” can be found in Arab thought since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This project argues that we are bound to find a rich tradition of political theorizing in modern Arab thought if we understand political theory to consist in more than just classifying and defining different modes of political authority, and prescribing how that authority should be practiced. If we also include the exercise of “critique”—of political authority, of how that authority is exercised, and of how “citizens” come to inhabit that authority in specific ways—then we can identify in contemporary Arab thought several viable political theoretical projects. Relatedly, if political theory is regarded not merely as a delineation of “just and unjust modes of political rule,” but to also as a means of understanding the constitution of agentive political subjects, oriented towards “the common” and attuned to the workings of despotism, then we would also find a tradition of “normative” political thinking in contemporary Arab thought. This project uses an understanding of political theory that is best depicted by Sheldon Wolin’s delineation of that field as,

[A] tradition of discourse concerned about the being and well being of collectivities. It is primarily a civic, and secondarily an academic activity. In my understanding this means that political theory is a critically oriented engagement with collective existence and with the political experiences of power to which it gives rise<sup>1</sup>.

At its core, this dissertation appropriates for political theory three civically-engaged academics with three distinct and sustained critical projects: The Moroccan historian

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<sup>1</sup> Sheldon Wolin’s definition of political theory is quoted in Wendy Brown, 2005. *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. P. 70.

Abdullah Laroui (1933-), the Egyptian philosopher Hassan Hanafi (1935-), and the Moroccan philosopher Mohamed Abed al-Jabiri (1936-2010).

The central argument of this dissertation is that contemporary Arab political theory centers around accounts of the constitution and transformation of the Arab political subject. Specifically, I argue that Arab thinkers provide multiple and complex accounts of the historical constitution of the Arab subject's understanding, experience, and modes of inhabiting the political world. They do so by examining the formation of the particular approaches to authority, legitimacy, agency, and political modernity that have come to pervade the contemporary Arab ideological and political scenes, and therefore have come to dominate the Arab practice of politics. Such accounts can be found in the genre usually referred to as "cultural critique,"<sup>2</sup> namely, in writings that offer an examination and critique of ideological trends in Arab culture and politics, or, more pertinently, in studies of the Arab-Islamic linguistic, aesthetic, religious and philosophical heritage, often referred to as "*turath*" (literally, heritage or legacy). Both kinds of accounts, I suggest, provide critical examinations of the constitution of political subjectivity in the context of Arab-Islamic history, as well as of contemporary modes of inhabiting and expressing that political subjectivity. This project offers an interpretation of the works of three preeminent Arab thinkers, and uses the lens of political subjectivity to excavate and explicate the political theoretical thrust of contemporary Arab thought.

## II. The Lens:

Political subjectivity is a concept used across a range of political theories (feminist, identity politics, politics of recognition, queer theory, critical race studies, etc.), in anthropologies of the state, and in post-colonial theory. It had also been used to analyze a variety of political theoretical concepts like secularism, identity, authority, democracy, etc. The analytical utility that this term provides for these traditions of political and social theorizing, and for my current endeavor, is the conception of the subject as a being who is constituted rather than simply given. It provides a lens through which to examine how various historical, social, political, and discursive formations produce particular modes of selfhood, and specific dispositions towards politics and society.

In feminist political theory, for instance, studies have used the concept of political subjectivity to examine how legal and policy discourses of the state produce particular notions of gender difference and of modular gendered subjects, and how subversive potential could be cultivated for collective action against such notions. In the words of a feminist political theorist, the understanding of the subject of politics as historically constituted "moves beyond theories of the subject organized with reference to a natural core, authentic humanity, or enduring metaphysical essence" and therefore provides

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<sup>2</sup> Laroui (1967) understands his project as one of cultural analysis; Jabiri (1980) understands his as a critique of culture; and Hanafi (1980) as "cultural renewal." Likewise, commentaries on these projects have variously characterized them as "cultural critique" (Kassab, 2010), "social thought" (Akhavi, 1997), or more often, the non-descript "Arab thought" (Boullata, 1990, Abu Rabi', 2004). Only Anouar Abdel Malek (1980) refers to that body of thought as "Arab political thought," although he does not give a specific account of why it is "political."

potential for subversive collective action (Weeks, 1998, 1). Postcolonial studies have likewise used political subjectivity to examine the peculiar ways in which colonialism, anticolonial nationalisms, and postcolonial states have produced novel modes of approaching and inhabiting the political world that cannot be captured through typologies of “tradition” and “modernity.”<sup>3</sup>

Particularly pertinent to this study is the way political subjectivity had been mobilized to illuminate how traditionally non-political realms exercise profound influence on formations of authority, legitimacy, and democratic practice. Saba Mahmood’s (2006) work illuminates how US foreign policy converges with efforts of “modern Muslim reformers” in constructing new modalities of religious subjectivity better suited to liberal political rule. Specifically, Mahmood argues that “the autonomous individual believer, privileged in the arguments of these thinkers [and of the US government], is a necessary protagonist in the plot of secular political rationality, one who owes his allegiance to the sovereign rule of the state rather than structures of traditional authority” (340). The religious hermeneutics proposed by these discourses does not only consist in “theological prescriptions and a particular style of scriptural interpretation,” they are also aimed at “the creation of an enlightened religious subject capable of realizing a “religiously neutral political ethic” (330). In a similar vein, Wendy Brown’s (2003) work interrogates the formative influence of neo-liberal economics on the political subject of late modern West. Brown examines how “[t]he extension of economic rationality to formerly non-economic domains . . . prescribes citizen-subject conduct in a neo-liberal order” (43). Particularly, Brown notes that, when adopted by the state, neo-liberalism a citizen who “who strategizes for her/ himself among various social, political and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organize these options. A fully realized neo-liberal citizenry would be the opposite of public-minded, indeed it would barely exist as a public. The body politic ceases to be a body but is, rather, a group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers . . . which is, of course, exactly the way voters are addressed in most American campaign discourse” (ibid). What the notion of political subjectivity provides in all these instances is the possibility of examining how the subject’s embeddedness within a complex of historical, cultural, social, and political contexts shapes that subject’s capacities to know, make sense of, experience, and engage with the social and political world through a variety of registers—rational, psychical, moral, and affective.

Conceived this way, political subjectivity is a concept that has a deep affinity to the works and respective political investments of the thinkers analyzed in this study, and thereby offers a powerful lens for rendering their respective political theories. Laroui, Hanafi, and Jabiri all conceive of the subject of their analysis as thoroughly constituted by his<sup>4</sup> embeddedness in Arab-Islamic history and culture<sup>5</sup>. To them, the subjectivity of

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2000) *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, and Partha Chatterjee’s (1999) *Nationalist Discourse and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this study, I shall use the masculine pronoun when I refer to the respective discussions of Arab subjectivity in Laroui, Hanafi, and Jabiri’s work. The reason for this choice is not only that these thinkers exclusively use the masculine pronoun in their studies of Arab culture and its effect on the Arab subject (the masculine pronoun in Arabic serves for “general” usage), but mainly because none of them is attuned to or has written about women in Arab society, neither do they discuss the works of female Arab

the Arab individual is neither stable across time, nor does it feature a perennial essence. Rather, as Laroui notes, the Arab's sense of "self, history, and the future" all vary according to the historical moment the subject inhabits, and depends on the various constellations of "traditional" and "modern" worldviews that pervade each of these moments (1995, 24). Additionally, for each of these critics, the subject's experience of the world is not only conscious and/or rational. Each of them envisions that experience to take place in a variety of loci (the psyche, the affect, the conscience, consciousness, and the unconscious) and to employ different sensibilities: rational, emotional, moral.

However, Laroui, Hanafi and Jabiri's formulations only tacitly express these meanings. Namely, while they could all be read to provide accounts of the historical constitution of the Arab subject, they do not understand their endeavor as such (except for Jabiri's works on Arab reason). Rather, they conceive of their projects as attempts to critique Arab culture, conceived as a set of historical modes of understanding the world that continue to influence the present. In their respective examinations of Arab ideology and of the Arab-Islamic cultural heritage, what concerns these thinkers most is an analysis of how culture affects social and political reality, not the formation and re-formation of the Arab self. One of the key contributions of my interpretation of these thinkers is my identification of the "Arab subject"<sup>6</sup> as the preliminary locus around which these thinkers' critical and transformative approaches revolve. For Laroui, I argue that this subject is the intellectual, through elucidating how he conceives of the intellectual as both a representative of the problems of the Arab condition, as well as the primary agent of historical change. Likewise, my interpretation of Hanafi shows how his delineation of the political, social, and cultural problems pervading the Arab world ultimately hinges on his problematization of how the Arab subject's mode of approaching society and politics. Though Jabiri analyzes "Arab reason" starting the mid 1980s, my analyses of his work underscores how his understanding of the Arab predicament as primarily a problem of Arab subjectivity dates back to his earlier works, and how his *Critique of Arab Reason* presents an instantiation in the broader arc of a project that intends to critique and transform that subjectivity.

Similarly, none of these thinkers provide an account of the various registers and sensibilities that comprise the subject's experience of social and political reality. My interpretation excavates and explicates these registers and sensibilities, underlining how they could all be seen to conceive of the subject's constitution as operating on psychical, rational, conscious, and unconscious registers all at once. In so doing, I present an interpretive account of these thinkers' understanding of subjectivity (which they variously refer to by notions like selfhood, reason, and consciousness) that is both faithful to, but could not explicitly be found in, any of their works.

More significantly, I take these thinkers' analyses a step further by rendering the political in their respective notions of subjectivity. My interpretation of Laroui, Hanafi

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intellectuals. Their observations and formulations are based on a "general assessment" of the state of Arab ideology and politics in which "men" are considered to be the primary subjects.

<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of how I define "Arab culture" in this work, see pages 11-14.

<sup>6</sup> I use "Arab subject" to capture the figure whom I argue presents the primary unity of analysis for Laroui, Hanafi, and Jabiri. In their works, that figure is sometimes referred to as the "Arab intellectual," "Arab consciousness," "Arab reason," the "Arab self," or just "the Arab." For a detailed explanation of how I mobilize the "Arab subject" in this study, please refer to 11- 14.

and Jabiri examines the political entailments and implications of their conceptualizations of “Arab consciousness,” the “Arab self,” and “Arab reason.” Each of these notions, I argue, includes a particular understanding of authority, legitimacy, justice, human agency, and of how collective human life should be approached and organized. In exploring the political subjectivity implied by these theorizations of Arab culture and selfhood, I provide a reading of these thinkers that had not hitherto been done in the English language literature on contemporary Arab thought.

### III. The Literature:

The English language literature on contemporary (post-1967) Arab thought is generally characterized by dearth. To put it in Abu Rabi’s (2004) words, “the field of contemporary Arab thought is still virgin territory, unmapped by studies in English” (7). The scarcity of English language accounts of contemporary intellectual engagements with politics and culture in the Arab world explains the pervasiveness of what I call “survey” studies of contemporary Arab thought. Such studies have tried to offer various kinds of roadmaps for the Western reader about the major themes and dilemmas that preoccupy modern-day Arab intellectuals. Notable attempts in that regard include Leonard Binder’s *Islamic Liberalism* (1988), ‘issa Boullata’s *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought* (1990), Ibrahim Abu Rabi’s *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in post 1967 Intellectual History* (2004), and most recently, Suzanne Kassab’s *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (2010). The objective of these works is not to offer sustained examinations of particular thinkers, or discipline-specific interpretations of their intellectual projects. Rather, they aim to familiarize the Western reader with the hitherto-uncharted territory of Arab thought. To put it in Boullata’s words, “the point to be made is that individual authors are not studied here for themselves but for the contribution they make to the general picture of Arab culture today” (9). As such, these works open the door for subsequent in-depth examinations of specific thinkers and themes. Accordingly, my current study, as one such in-depth examination, draws on these roadmaps insofar as they provide insights about the general thrust of contemporary Arab thought, its historical situatedness, and its animating concerns. I engage these works’ depictions of Laroui, Hanafi, and Jabiri, to endorse, complicate, or challenge their claims.

While these works allude to the “interplay between the cultural and the political” with varying levels of frequency and nuance, none of them provides an interpretation of Arab thought as political theory. They tend to engage this body of thought in generic terms like “cultural critique” (Kassab, 2010) “social thought” (Abu Rabi’, 2004: Akhavi, 1997), “Arab culture” (Boullata, 1990). Aside from comprising an in-depth examination of the intellectual projects of three thinkers, this dissertation is concerned with explicating the political entailments of their projects, with a specific focus on how they provide an account of the constitution and re-constitution of the Arab political subject. As such, these valuable introductions provide a necessary prelude for, not a substitute for, my current endeavor.

A second genre of studies of contemporary Arab thought brings that thought to bear on particular themes, such as democracy, civil society, or modernity. Two exemplary works from this genre are Armando Salvatore’s *Islam and the Political*

*Discourse of Modernity* (1997) and Michaelle Browers's *Democracy and Civil Society in Arab Political Thought* (2006). These works are invested in exploring and situating the formulations that contemporary Arab or Muslim thinkers offer about central political questions of their time. Michaelle Browers provides an insightful study of the way democracy and civil society have been understood and theorized in the Arab-Islamic tradition, with a special focus on contemporary understandings. Specifically, the book examines "Arab liberals' debate over the requirements of democracy" and "the contemporary Islamist discourse on the role of religion in the state, society and political change," as well as the perspectives of increasingly alienated Arab socialists and marginalized Arab feminists. Browers provides no sustained engagements of specific thinkers, but knits together groups of thinkers around particular concerns, tracing their contributions to particular trends of thinking about democracy and civil society. Brief references are made to the way individual thinkers (including Laroui, Jabiri, and Hanafi) address these trends, but these formulations are situated within specific ideological traditions and conceptual contestations, rather than within the immanent framework of the thinkers' respective projects. Brower's work provides a nuanced categorization of contemporary Arab thinkers, using the political concepts of democracy and civil society as its criteria. What it does not offer is an account of how these concepts constitute parts (and, more typically, after-effects) of the broader trajectory of the intellectual and political projects of individual thinkers. My study can be seen as a way of deepening and broadening the thrust of Brower's work by situating the "political claims" of individual writers in the broader context of their thought.

Salvatore's work examines the trajectory of thinking about "Islam and modernity"<sup>7</sup> in the context of "learned discourses in both 'Western' and 'Arab-Islamic' contexts" since the 1960s (xiv). Specifically, he provides a study of the hermeneutics through which "Western political discourses of modernity have intervened in the construction of Islam, and the definitions of Islam have contributed to shape political discourses of modernity both in the West and in the 'Arab-Islamic world'" (ibid). He proceeds to delineate a set of "hermeneutic circles" that feature a historically-situated interpretation of how the relationship between "Islam" and the "political" have come to be perceived in Western (orientalist / social-scientific) and Islamic intellectual traditions. He tracks the development from essentialized views of "Islam as such," which understood politics as "derivative of religion," to "a bi-dimensional hermeneutic field where the political acquires the status of an additional and autonomous dimension grounded in the concern of the observer" (117). Within the "Arab-Islamic" world, this "status" of the Islam-politics relationship varies from conceiving Islam to be "neutral" towards the realm of politics, to conceiving it as the "solution" to political problems, followed by the attempt to "transcend the dead polarization between the neutralist and solutionist hermeneutic circles." This transcendence would be achieved by "focusing on the proper method for rationally authenticating the [Arab-Islamic] cultural heritage in order to articulate a viable political discourse of modernity not merely imitative of the West's" (219). Salvatore's examination of this last "hermeneutic circle" features a brief

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that Salvatore defines "Islam" as "the plural hermeneutics of a complex civilization and the flexible medium of collective identity centered on one Koranic word, Islam. He defines "modernity" as "the sort of politically relevant discourse mediated by intellectuals once the idea of rationality is recognized as embodied in society, no longer confined to a transcendent *logos* (xiii).

and incisive analysis of Jabiri and Hanafi's projects as exemplary attempts to provide a discourse of political modernity from within an Arab-Islamic reference point.

More generally, Salvatore provides a sophisticated interpretation and periodization of the way the relationship between "Islam" and "politics" is represented in the Western discourse on "political Islam," and in Arab discourses on "tradition (*turath*) and modernity." His work is not about the political projects of particular thinkers *per se*, but about how their ideas have given rise to new ways of thinking about the relationship between Islam and politics. His study is helpful in charting a theoretically informed map of the shifting ways this relationship had been construed. It is also one of the few works to provide a systematic and sustained analysis of how "the political" is implicated in contemporary delineations of "the Arab-Islamic cultural heritage," and the relationship of that heritage to "modernity." My project can be thought of as an "extension" of Salvatore's work, building upon his insights about the implicatedness of the political and the religious/cultural in contemporary Arab thought. In particular, my interpretations of Laroui, Hanafi, and Jabiri analyze not only how their understanding of "the Arab-Islamic heritage" should be considered within the broader framework of "Arab or Islamic modernity," but how "the political" appears at every juncture of their thought (their critiques of Arab ideology and of the constitution of the Arab subject) through their proposals for the transformation of the Arab political subject.

The third genre, and the one in which I situate this project, examines and interprets the work of contemporary Arab thinkers from a political theoretical perspective. This category is by far the smallest; the only existing work that can properly be placed in it is Roxanne Euben's *Enemy in the Mirror*.<sup>8</sup> In her work, Euben examines three "fundamentalist" Islamic thinkers: Afghani, 'Abduh, and Qutb. She contests Western social science's understanding of fundamentalism as "reactive, defensive, and nativistic, and its appeal a function of its efficacy as a conduit for the fury, fear, insecurity, and alienation that are the concomitants of trying socioeconomic conditions and circumstance in the modern world" (20). Euben traces these reactions to the "historically and culturally contingent intellectual inheritance [of the West]: the discourse of modern rationalism" (21). To be sure, as Euben notes, there are diverse understandings of "rationalism" in modern Western thought, but the particular narrative she is concerned with understands "the rise of rationalism as made possible by the retreat of an authoritative transcendental order from the public realm, and concomitantly, the eclipse of the epistemological, historical, and political certainties such an order was thought to have sustained" (ibid). The "modernization narrative" that has come to dominate social science considers "rationalization to be the measure and substance of modernity itself,"

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<sup>8</sup> If we eliminated the words "contemporary" and "modern," this category would open up to include works on "Islamic political philosophy" that discuss the "political thought" of ancient/medieval Islamic thinkers like al-Farabi, Averroes, etc. These would include Charles Butterworth (ed.), *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy*, 1992. Princeton: Princeton University Press, which features articles al-Indi, al-Farabi, al-Razi, Avicenna, Ibn-Baja and Ibn-Tufayl. Mohsen Mahdi, 2001. *Al-Farabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. However, such studies are of a different nature. Though they share their "Arab-Islamic" character with my authors, they do not share with their present-day counterparts the anxieties generated by the experiences of colonialism, decolonization, and postcolonial statehood, neither are they haunted by the specter of "Western modernity" that shapes the ways these authors conceive of themselves, their histories, their present condition, and their routes to progress, to use Laroui's formulation (1996, 23).

and thus explains “fundamentalism” as the epiphenomenal expression of the birth pangs of modernity in the non-West.

The major problem with Western social scientific discourse on fundamentalism as Euben understands it is that they bracket the *substance* of fundamentalist cultural and political projects, without taking into consideration the specific vision they propose for the ideal society and polity. Western social science is only interested in that content insofar as it serves to explain the “sociopolitical function” that fundamentalism plays in a specific context (23). Implied in this kind of reading, Euben adds, is the contention “that the growing appeal of fundamentalism owes little to its inherent power as a moral ideal” (24). Accordingly, she concludes, social scientific explanations of fundamentalism not only neglect its context, they also distort it by positing that the substance of fundamentalism lays “outside the realm of rational discourse” (ibid).

By contrast, Euben argues that “‘better’ understandings of Islamic fundamentalism are ones that begin by attending to the inherent power of the ideas themselves and hence, the relevance of political actor’s normative commitments to explanation” (25). Such an understanding could be attained by what she terms the “dialogic method of interpretation,” which she defines as “an approach to studying political phenomena that engages the participants’ ideas on their own terms, or at least on as close to their own terms as is possible for an interpreter whose position is exterior to the worldview of the subject” (12-13). Using this approach, Euben provides a sustained engagement with the works of Afghani, ‘Abduh, and Qutb, arguing that “insofar as [they] are animated by questions about the nature of legitimate sovereignty, the relationship between moral and political life, and the individual to the community” and aim to “challenge Western cultural and political power” (96), these thinkers are indeed political theorists (51). Euben takes the “findings” of her examination further to offer productive comparisons between Qutb’s critique of post-Enlightenment rationalism and critiques of modernity in contemporary Western political thought, arguing that such cross-cultural comparisons “are transformative for they provide a perspective from which to see parallels and comparisons that narrower conceptions of political theory occlude” (123).

My project builds upon Euben’s work in more ways than one. Like Euben’s, the current project attempts to engage in an immanent examination and critique of Arab thought and tries to understand it on its own terms. I do so by situating my thinkers within their historical context, and weaving connections between their writings to elucidate how problems are reflected upon, complicated, and responded to. As with Euben’s work, this project attempts to render Laroui, Hanafi, and Jabiri as political theorists. Euben uses “dialogic interpretation” of her thinkers’ works to unravel their understanding of legitimate authority and political community; I do so through an examination of my thinkers’ respective accounts of the constitution of the Arab political subject, and their proposals for his transformation. The major difference between my project and Euben’s is thus in the theoretical lenses we use, and in the thinkers we discuss. Euben’s analysis stops with Sayyid Qutb (196), and mine picks up where hers ends, discussing the writings of three preeminent thinkers that span from the late 1960s till the early 2000s. The time period that my project covers assumes particular importance because it is generally understood to mark the onset of “contemporary” Arab thought: the body of thought animated by the sense of disillusionment that followed the Arab defeat or *naksa* (literally, regression) of the Six Days war of June 1967.



## V. The *Zeitgeist*:

Interpreting “Arab thought” as political theory entails inhabiting the world of that thought and understanding its problems, its guiding questions, and its underlying concerns. This raises the question of periodization, or how I define the “contemporary” in “contemporary Arab thought,” and, accordingly, of what I take to be the animating themes of its corpus.

Studies of Arab thought conventionally adopt a periodization whereby “modern Arab thought” starts with the Arab *Nahda* (renaissance or awakening) in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, and ends in 1914 (Laroui, 1977), 1945 (Jabiri, 1982), or the mid twentieth century (Kassab, 2010). “Contemporary Arab thought” is thought to begin after the Arab defeat in the Six Days War in 1967. This periodization considers violent encounters with the West to be formative of the *zeitgeist* of the epoch: the first in colonial expansion, variously dated to the Napoleonic Campaign on Egypt and Syria (1798-1801), the reign of Mehmet Ali Pasha in Egypt (1805-1859), and the onset of colonial settlements in the Arab east in 1882; and the second in a U.S.-supported war on Egypt and Syria. This periodization also introduces us to the genetic intertwining of politics (colonial expansion and settlement, war, decolonization struggles, postcolonial nation-building) and culture (self-concepts that invoke cultural heritage) in Arab thought.

This periodization gives us an overarching view of how culture, understood both as intellectual activity and as the cultural past with which a people identifies, is mobilized to provide an understanding of the “Arab self,” geared towards accounting for that self’s “failure” to progress in the present and to chart a route for its future development. The key difference between the mobilization of culture in the Arab *Nahda* and in the late 1960s has to do with what these thinkers were doing with *turath*. In the first instance, they considered *turath* (the cultural heritage)<sup>9</sup> to contain both a resource on which intellectual activity should draw, and a problematic tradition that should be critiqued. In his *Contemporary Arab Political Thought*, Anwar Abdel Malek (1980) depicts how *salafis*, liberals and Marxists all shared this understanding of the Arab cultural past, even if their identification of what was “luminary” and what was “problematic” tended to differ (3-4). Beginning the late 1960s, as the following chapters will show, Arab thinkers started to consider the “cultural past” not solely as a “resource” or a “problem,” but also as a mode of knowing and acting upon reality, an epistemology and a subjectivity, that should be thoroughly examined and critiqued before it can be productively engaged. This is the understanding of *turath* that we start to see with Abdullah Laroui in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and that reaches its epitome with Jabiri and Hanafi in the 1980s and 1990s.

This project agrees with such a periodization, while modifying two of its claims. First, the idea that the “self-reflective turn” (Kassab, 2010, 2) and “radical self-critique” (Ajami, 2001, 55) of 1967 was unprecedented understates the self-critical aspect of the Arab *Nahda* that preceded it, and of continued attempts to critique and reconstitute the “Arab self” through Arab culture in the 1950s and early 1960s (as we see with Zaki Naguib Mahmood (1961, 1967) and Malek ben-Nabi (1959), or, most markedly, Sayyid

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<sup>9</sup> For a fuller account of *turath*, refer to p. 11-14.

Qutb (1949, 1964). I agree with Jabiri's (1982) claim that the preeminent project of Arab thought since the *Nahda* has been the "modernization of Arab reason" (23); 1967 provided an inflection point, where critiques that were already in progress were crystallized and consolidated. The most telling example of that this project offers is Abdullah Laroui's *L'idéologie arabe contemporaine*, which, published before June 1967, already carries the seeds of the critique that he elaborates in his later writings about "historical thinking" and Arab intellectuals, in 1973 and 1976 respectively.

The second claim offered by the conventional periodization that this project modifies is that the turn to culture in 1967 implied the increasing neglect of socioeconomic analysis on the part of Arab thinkers (Massad, 2005, 17; Kassab, 2010, 117). The problem is not with this claim as such, but with its failure to qualify and complicate itself through a close examination of the claims that post 1967 thinkers have made about their concern with culture. As my examination of Laroui, Hanafi, and Jabiri shows, these thinkers do not consider their engagements with culture as a substitute for a sociological, economic, or political analysis of the Arab condition (this assertion is particularly strong in Laroui and Jabiri, both of whom see themselves as socialists). Instead, these thinkers make the argument that an engagement with culture, with the way people come to know and act on the world, is key in the context of postcolonial and "Third World" societies, whose culture has been disrupted by colonial and imperialist intervention and expansion, while at the same time being dominated by the economic, political and cultural models put forward by "Western modernity." This socio-economic disruption, combined with "cultural imperialism" to use Said's term (1993), results in a relationship of non-correspondence between economy, society, and culture (or ideology), upon which Laroui and Jabiri both elaborate at some length (Laroui, 1973; Jabiri, 1985). In their understanding, colonialism and global capitalism prevent the possibility of establishing associations between these three realms, while at the same time continuing to impose a particular modality of thought and action (Western modernity) as exemplary. In such a context, cultural analysis understood as the intellectual examination of the constitution of the Arab subject provides a way to break the vicious cycle of non-correspondence between society and economy on the one hand, and ideology on the other; it attempts to reconstitute the way the subject approaches the world, and therefore the way he acts upon it, deploying theory to transform society and the economy.

This project takes the Arab defeat in the 1967 Six Days War as a moment of intensified critique of the "Arab self" that interrogates it for the perceived failure of the Arab nationalist project to build an industrialized economy, a democratic polity, an educated populace, and a creative culture. The late 1960s marked the beginning of the critique that the Arab *Nahda* posed to Arab culture and its subject, after the "first round" of critique failed to initiate progress, and after a sufficient historical distance (decolonization and at least one decade of the formation of the nation-state in most Arab countries) was attained from the first *Nahda* moment. Like the Arab *Nahda*, post-1967 Arab thought is marked by an introspective turn, now deepened and enriched, if made more somber, by a "century of disillusionment, disappointments, humiliations and defeats" (Kassab, 2010, 20). Also like the Arab *Nahda*, that self-critical impulse expresses itself most clearly in the domain of "culture": that is, of ideas about the identity and historical constitution of the "Arab self," and of how that identity and constitution

serve to explain the defeat and continued “backwardness” of that self, as well as to offer a vision for its advancement.

Through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Arab thought increasingly turned its critical eye to culture (now understood as both the Arab *Nahda* and the Arab-Islamic heritage), as the “Arab crisis” of underdevelopment persisted<sup>10</sup> and the rise of “Islamism” compelled Arab thinkers to engage with “the problem of the relationship between Arab-Islamic *turath* and the ‘globalizing,’ Western-centered modernity within a metamorphosing transcultural space” (Salvatore, 1997, 220).<sup>11</sup> The relationship between Arab thought and its context should thus be considered through these thinkers’ embeddedness in a postcolonial moment characterized by the repeated faltering of the post-independence modernization projects; by the perceived rise of Western hegemony in the economic, political, and cultural fields; by these thinker’s perception of the persistence of the “Arab Islamic *turath*” as a source of vision and meaning in the Arab cultural and political worlds; and, last but not least, by the call for a retrospective critique of Arab thought’s accomplishments since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is with this zeitgeist in mind that I enter the worlds of Laroui, Hanafi, and Jabiri.

#### IV. Arab Culture and its Subject:

The terms “Arab culture” and “Arab subject” have come up repeatedly in the foregoing discussion, and will continue to do so in the ensuing chapters of this dissertation. Whereas I have tried to present provisional definitions of these two terms in the sections above, I would now like to provide a “thicker” definition of how I use them in the context of the present study.

Whereas “political subjectivity” is the concept I use to explicate the political theory of Laroui, Hanafi and Jabiri, “Arab subject” and “Arab culture” are meant to reflect these thinkers’ *own understanding* of these terms. It is thus important to provide an account of these terms as these thinkers use them.

My authors use “Arab culture” in two distinct but interrelated senses. The first describes these authors’ understanding of the intellectual activity in which they are involved. Jabiri underscores this sense of culture as intellectual activity by highlighting the common root of the words for “culture or *thaqafa*” and “intellectual or *muthaqqaf*” in the Arabic language (1994, 18). Both words originate in the root *th-q-f* (to know, to understand), and their derivations from that root stress the knowledge and knowledge-producing connotations of *thaqafa* (literally, the exercise of knowing or understanding) and *muthaqqaf* (literally, the bearer of knowledge or culture). Laroui provides a similar understanding of “culture” when he criticizes the anthropological trend to consider “all forms of human expression” as belonging to culture. This would mean that culture is not delimited to the fields of “art and literature” but extend to cover the realms of “religious rituals, myths, culinary practices, ethnic dress, etc.” (69). Laroui finds this trend

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<sup>10</sup> The “Arab crisis” is the term Hassan Hanafi (2005) uses to express the multiple political, economic, and social problems that face contemporary Arab countries.

<sup>11</sup> For a consideration of the broader context of Arab thinkers’ engagement with *turath* in the 1980s and 1990s, see Alexander Flores’s (1988) discussion of “partisans of the heritage” in “Egypt: A New Secularism.” MERIP, No. 153, Islam and the State (Jul-Aug, 1988).

problematic because it takes the specific historical experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century West and generalizes it to other parts of the world. Particularly, Laroui contends that this understanding of culture emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the U.S., and spread to Europe in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, completely dominating the West in the interwar period and beyond. Laroui (1973) describes the atmosphere in which this notion of “culture” was formulated as “anxious,” featuring “European loss of confidence in their culture” (73). Laroui rejects this “folkloric” notion of culture, and stresses that culture should instead be understood as a necessarily intellectual, conscious, and creative process. Not only does this definition of culture underline its objective, in Laroui’s view, of “deepening and broadening human abilities” (86), it also befits the goal of Arab postcolonial intellectuals, “carving a third way between the hegemonic and imperial culture of the West, and the ancient Arab-Islamic culture” in an attempt to capture, express, and ultimately move beyond the present Arab condition (83).

Laroui’s definition of culture as the tool for forging a “third way” between Western modernity and the Arab-Islamic tradition brings us to the second sense in which my thinkers define “Arab culture”: through the Arab-Islamic cultural heritage or *al-turath al-‘arabi al-islami* (henceforth *turath*). Literally, the word *turath* means legacy or inheritance. As such, it refers to what modern-day Arabs have “inherited” from their predecessors (or *salaf*). More specifically, this “inheritance” refers to a body of linguistic, aesthetic, religious, and philosophical works that date back to pre-Islamic times (the poetry of *Jahiliyya* for instance), and whose production is generally understood to have ended with the death of Averroes at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. As such, *turath* is understood as the repository of “intellectual activity” of the Arab past. Whereas my authors construct slightly different periodizations of *turath* (Hanafi considers it to consist solely in the religious and philosophical disciplines that emerged after Islam; Jabiri contends that the early Abbasid Era (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century AD) is formative of the modern-day understanding of *turath* but charts its history to extend till Averroes; and Laroui considers *turath* to be self-evident), all of them would agree that the definition above covers the overarching territory of modern-day understandings of the term.

What this definition does not cover, however, are the “ideological connotations” of *turath* in contemporary Arab thought. As Nelly Lahoud (2005) aptly points out, “*turath* does not only imply the history of a tradition that extends to the present; it also conveys the active sense of seeking to shape a political present by interpreting its identity in terms of a particular image of its past” (5). As this project discusses at some length, contemporary Arab intellectuals have mobilized *turath* in different ways depending on their visions for the Arab cultural and political future. For example, we will see how Laroui (1973) understands *turath* to consist in an understanding of history as a “group of subsequent events and orally-transmitted news that are not connected to each other in a relation of cause and effect, and that do not follow from one another, but that need an order to be imposed upon them from without in order for them to make sense” (54). This order, Laroui adds, is provided by divine mediation of these events, which defines them as either a “fall from” or a “return to” the “the age of light and truth” (ibid). By contrast, Hanafi considers *turath* as a resource whose “progressive” and luminary elements should be mined and reconstructed in accordance with the zeitgeist and pressing needs of present times (1980, 16). According to Jabiri, the only way that *turath* can be made

comprehensible, and potentially useful, for modern-day Arab society is through a holistic critical examination of its works and disciplines on their own terms (2004, 30).

What all of these mobilizations of *turath* have in common, however, is their insistence that the Arab-Islamic heritage is not a thing of the past. Rather, it is a living tradition that continues to shape the modes with which the Arab subject knows, experiences, and engages with the natural and human worlds. For contemporary Arab thinkers, *turath* represents “the living compendium of the past in the present... [that has come to be] the epistemological anchor of the present” since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Massad, 2005, 17). Here, Massad captures a crucial dimension of *turath* that Jabiri elaborates at some length (see Chapter 3): namely, that this particular usage of *turath* was devised by the *Nahda* thinkers as a way of rooting their claims (for decolonization, for progress, for self-assertion) in the Arab-Islamic past (1985, 35-40). This implies that the conceptualization of that past as a “legacy” (which the Arab subject inherits and which continues to influence the way he engages with his present) was a product of the Arab *Nahda* and its specific concerns, but continued to be deployed, albeit in different ways, by Arab intellectuals into the present.

Laroui, Hanafi and Jabiri generally understand the “Arab subject” as the “human being who is shaped by Arab culture” (Jabiri, 1984, 40), where “Arab culture” refers to the notion of *turath* as I define it above, as well as to the common linguistic and historical experience (colonialism, decolonization struggles, the Arab nationalism project) of the geographical and linguistic region usually referred to as the “Arab world.” None of these thinkers use the term “Arab subject,” but they use various formulations like “Arab consciousness,” “the Arab human being,” “Arab reason,” “the Arab self,” and “the Arab intellectual” whose implied meanings are similar. Each of these uses give a slightly different inflection to the term, but what is important to underscore is the self-evidence with which the authors attach the term “Arab” to various concepts (e.g., consciousness or reason) or words (self, intellectual, human being). Among the three authors, only Jabiri specifies what he means by the term “Arab” in “Arab human being,” and only summarily so, occasionally elaborating on the various meanings that term has come to hold over time.<sup>12</sup> More generally, Laroui, Hanafi and Jabiri consider their references to “Arab consciousness” or the “Arab self” self-evident, requiring no further elaboration for audiences that they assume to be Arabic-speaking intellectuals and students who identify Arab-Islamic *turath* and the Arab struggles for independence and statehood as their common heritage. My use of the “Arab subject” by way of capturing these thinkers’ various references to the “Arab,” is meant to underscore my thinkers’ concern with the “being and well being” of a particular collectivity, to echo Wolin’s words. The self-evidence with which they use the term “Arab” is in itself telling of the intuitiveness that these thinkers attribute to this collectivity’s existence, and their dedication of their respective projects to the examination, critique, and reformation of this collectivity and its constituents is one of the key, if not the key, political theoretical thrust of their projects.

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Jabiri discusses how the “Arab” of Arab nationalism, the sense of Arabness as an identity that is juxtaposed to other identities like Islam or Ottomanism, was entirely a product of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (1994, 30-40) while the “Arab” in Arab-Islamic *turath* is a product of the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century era of cultural flourishing (1984, 40-45).

Thus portrayed, the concept of the “Arab subject” seems to collapse the diverse histories, cultures, and politics of the Arab world. However, Laroui, Hanafi and Jabiri do exhibit an awareness of the distinct historical, cultural, and sociopolitical trajectories of different countries and “sub-cultures” of the Arab region. Both Laroui and Jabiri have written about historical, political and cultural formations in Morocco, and in North Africa more generally.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, some of Hanafi’s early phenomenological writings focus on an analysis of the “Egyptian personality.”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, each has written extensively in local newspapers about the specific social, political, and cultural concerns of their respective countries. That said, the vast majority of their intellectual output revolves around the “Arab condition” and is directed toward an “Arab audience.” These thinkers are conscious of specificity, but they identify it in terms of variations on the more general theme of the “Arab subject.”

## VI. The Thinkers:

Laroui, Hanafi, and Jabiri are among the most important and least studied thinkers of their generation, who were born in the 1930s and whose intellectual contributions have come to shape the terrain of Arab thought since the late 1960s. They are all academics who received training in both Western philosophy and the Arab-Islamic tradition. Laroui was trained as a historian at the Sorbonne under the supervision of Raymond Aaron before returning to teach at Muhammad V University in Rabat in 1963. After attaining his undergraduate degree in philosophy from Cairo University, Hanafi spent the decade from 1956 to 1966 working on his doctorate in philosophy, which was deeply influenced by the Catholic reformer Jean Guitton and the phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur. He then returned to teach philosophy at his alma mater. Jabiri received his undergraduate and doctoral training in philosophy at Muhammad V University, where his dissertation on Ibn Khaldoun, completed in 1970, earned him the first doctorate awarded by that university after independence; this is also where he went on to teach until his death in May 2010.

Each of these three thinkers has engaged in a sustained intellectual project that spans at least two decades. Laroui’s project consists in his work on Arab ideology and the Arab intellectual, and his subsequent series of “concepts” on *Ideology*, the *State*, *Reason*, and *Freedom*; for Hanafi, this project comprises his multi-volume *Heritage and Renewal* project; and for Jabiri it consists in a critique of contemporary Arab discourse, followed by the four-part *Critique of Arab Reason*, and its prelude *Contemporary Arab Discourse*. Laroui, Hanafi, and Jabiri all came of age intellectually at approximately the same time, around the late 1960s. This resulted in their engagement with a similar set of critical interests: the critique of the Arab *Nahda*, the post-1967 “crisis,” the consolidation of authoritarian states around Arab countries in the 1970s onwards, the rise of Western

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<sup>13</sup> For Jabiri’s writings on Morocco, see (1984) *al-intelegensia fi al Maghreb* (the Intelligentsia of Morocco), bayrut: Darr al-hadatha. For a collection of his journalistic writings, see *fi ghimar al-siyasa fikran wa mumarasa*, (in the Midst of Politics: Thought and Practice). 2009. bayrut: al-shabaka al-‘arabiyya lil nashr. Also see Laroui’s (1977) *The History of Maghrib: An Interpretive Essay*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. For his reflections on local and Arab events, see *khawater al-sabah: yawmiyyat* (1967-1973) and (1974-1981) published 2001 and 2003 respectively, al-dar al-bayda’: al-markaz al-thaqafi al-‘arabi.

<sup>14</sup> For a collection of Hanafi’s (1983) early works, refer to *qadaya fi fikrina al-mu’asir* (Issues in our Contemporary Thought). *Bairut: dar al-tanweer lil-tiba’a wa al-nashr*.

hegemony over economy (particularly with the neo-liberal IMF-dictated structural adjustment program of the late 1980s and early 1990s), the consequent deepening of social inequality, and the “Islamic revival” of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Overall, their projects express a concern with what they consider the persistent “backwardness” of Arab societies relative to the West, and to the “modern and independent nation-state” ideal that was constructed in the early post-independence period in the late 1950s.

These three thinkers were also interlocutors and readers of one another’s work. In 1974, Jabiri wrote a series of articles criticizing Laroui’s *Critique of Arab Ideology and Arabs and Historical Thinking*. In 1989, Jabiri and Hanafi engaged in an exchange in the Paris-based Arab newspaper *al-yawm al-sabe’* in which they discussed some of the hottest topics of the day, such as secularism, liberalism, Nasserism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and tradition and modernity. Likewise, Hanafi (1980) wrote an essay on Laroui’s oeuvre, although the manuscript was lost before publication (15). In a brief (and disparaging) comment in his *Khawater al-sabah* (2001), Laroui mentions that he had read Jabiri’s critique of his work. What is important here is not the content of the exchanges, which have tended to be either polemical (as in Jabiri’s engagement with Laroui) or an expression of the “findings” of the thinkers’ respective examinations of *turath* (as in the exchange between Jabiri and Hanafi). Rather, the exchanges testify to the thinkers’ shared investments, and highlight the potential for their mutual influence. This facilitates putting these thinkers in conversation with each other, highlighting their key conceptual agreements and disagreements, and underlining the convergence and divergence in their respective critiques of Arab ideology and of the Arab political subject.

These three thinkers share a deep investment in Arab politics, and are representative of three distinct ideological currents: Marxism (Laroui), Islamism (Hanafi), and nationalism (Jabiri). Jabiri’s affiliation with the Moroccan Arab socialist party is usually considered “proof” of his Arab nationalist credentials, but the complexities of the ideological affiliation of Hanafi and Laroui often renders their works contested. Laroui is variously referred to as an “eclectic *marxisant*” (Binder, 1988, 317) or a liberal (Aksikas, 2009, 7). This ambiguity in his thought is, as I discuss in the first chapter, attributable to his conviction that Marxism is only possible when “the fruits of liberalism” are thoroughly assimilated by Arab society (1973, 7). Likewise, Hanafi considers himself a founder and major advocate of the “Islamic Left,” whose ideology stresses the Islamic commitment to resist oppression and attain social justice (1988, 14). His “Islamist” self-identification notwithstanding, he had been the subject of hostility of some “Islamist groups” for his approach to interpreting religious texts, and, as I argue in chapter two, his conceptions of freedom and reason invoke distinctly liberal formulations of these terms. Indeed, the complexity of these thinkers’ intellectual contributions is itself representative of the multiple resonances of contemporary modes of Arab political thinking, as this study will show.

These three thinkers were political engaged scholars. For Laroui, this meant publishing his personal reflections on political events<sup>15</sup>. Hanafi had a brief affiliation with the Muslim brotherhood in 1951, before leaving to Paris for his graduate study. Upon his return to Egypt shortly before the 1967 defeat, Hanafi, by his own account, placed his academic writing on hold in order to engage in various political debates, publishing a

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<sup>15</sup> For a listing of these reflections, refer to footnote 9.

series of articles that spoke to his understanding of the major problems in Arab culture and politics. As noted above, Hanafi's writings on the reinterpretation of the Islamic heritage earned him the hostility of some Islamist groups. Jabiri is perhaps the most consistently politically-involved figure among the three thinkers. In 1959, he joined forces with the leftist leader Mehdi ben-Baraka to form the *Ittihad* party, where he acted as an editor of the party's influential newspaper, *al-Tahrir*. He remained actively engaged in party politics and was elected as a member of *Ittihad's* political bureau, before leaving his position in the party in 1981 to devote his energies to writing the *Critique*. However, Jabiri never truly left the party, and continued to write for its paper *Tahrir* till the 2000s (Aksikas, 2009, 64). In sum, the attunement and participation of these thinkers in contemporary political debates conveys the deep political investments of their intellectual projects, and to these projects' amenability to a political-theoretical reading of the kind I provide here.

## VII. Synopsis:

The three main chapters of this dissertation are generally structured to address the main components that I take to be characteristic of each thinker's project: their critiques of Arab ideology, their accounts and problematization of the constitution of the contemporary Arab subject, and their proposals for the transformation of that subject. This broad tripartite classification is not a "template" into which I fit each of my thinkers, but was generated by my interpretation of their works. The common categorization also provides a useful structure for putting these thinkers in conversation with one another regarding the major components of their thought.

In addition to reconstructing their thought according to its critical and prescriptive components, my engagement with these thinkers takes the form of analyzing and interpreting these components in terms of their political entailments. In chapter one, I analyze Laroui's understanding of the role of the Arab intellectual, underscoring the profoundly political inflections of that understanding. I also highlight Laroui's identification of the intellectual as the Arab subject *par excellence*, and his "crisis" as symptomatic of the Arab condition as a whole. I then examine Laroui's critique of Arab ideology, finding in it a depiction of three modular political subjectivities that correspond to the colonial, semi-colonial, and postcolonial stages of Arab history. Further, I interpret Laroui's concepts of traditionalism and historicism as characterizing the malady and the cure, respectively, for Arab political subjectivity. Specifically, I underscore Laroui's theorization of traditionalism as a mode of conceiving history and human agency that finds its roots in *turath*, and that should be overcome should the Arab subject be emancipated from his subjugation to the past. Likewise underline Laroui's conception of historicism as a theory of dialectically progressive history whose adoption would liberate the postcolonial Arab intellectual from his ambivalent relationship to the modern West. I then assess Laroui's proposal for the transformation of the Arab subject, concluding that it does not adequately address the challenges identified by his analysis of that Arab cultural condition.

In chapter two, I start by examining Hanafi's definition of the "Arab crisis," concluding that, like Laroui, he identifies the "Arab subject" as its locus. I proceed to interpret how Hanafi mobilizes the concept of *turath* as a lived tradition in order to



critique what he takes to be the major currents in contemporary Arab thought, Islamism and secularism (Marxism and liberalism). Whereas Laroui argues that a rupture with *turath* is necessary for progress, Hanafi argues that the solution of the crisis-ridden Arab condition could only be attained through a reinterpretation of *turath* to make it current to Arab society's needs. In that vein, I interpret Hanafi's *Heritage and Renewal* project as providing both a critique of the political subjectivity of the *turath*-constituted "Arab consciousness," and an attempt at reconstructing that subjectivity through the reconstruction of *turath*.

In chapter three, I discuss Jabiri's characterization of the "*Nahda* problematic" and its locus, "Arab reason." I show how Jabiri considers Arab social and political problems as, in large part, a result of the predominance of problematic ways of conceiving social and political reality in Arab society. I discuss Jabiri's critique of Arab ideology as a preliminary diagnostic of these problematic modes, and discern in his various works his view of modernity as a mobilization of *turath*, conceived as a set of founding principles (reason, resistance to despotism, etc.), to overcome the problematic present condition towards a future that is both viable as well as progressive. In that light, I analyze Jabiri's *oeuvre* in the *Critique of Arab Reason* as an attempt to initiate an Arab modernity through examining the reasons underlying the stagnation of the Arab social, political and cultural condition, and identifying the founding principles that could propel that condition forward.

In the conclusion, I revisit the relationship between culture and politics in contemporary Arab thought, underscoring how Laroui, Hanafi, and Jabiri's understanding of culture render it the site of politics *par excellence*. Specifically, I argue that these authors' theorization of culture as formative of the ways the subject thinks, feels, experiences, and acts upon social and political reality explains their consideration of culture as the primary locus of the Arab subject's formation and transformation.

## **Chapter II:** **Political Theory as Ideology Critique: Abdullah Laroui's Critique of the Arab Intellectual**

*Since the time of al-Nahda, our bodies have been living in one century while our thoughts and feelings inhabit another...this has been the trick played on us by the backward parts of our societies and our psyches for the purpose of perpetuating and exploiting this backwardness<sup>16</sup>.*

—Abdullah Laroui (1973, 24)

### **I. Introduction**

Published right before the Arab defeat in the 1967 *naksa*, Laroui's *L'idéologie arabe contemporaine* provides a narrative and a critique of Arab intellectuals' engagement with the colonial and post-colonial condition. Laroui's oeuvre also features an assessment of the mode of operation, and the degree of success of Nasserist nationalism, by then more than a decade old project. Written in French but intended for an audience of "Arab intellectuals and political leaders" (1973, 16) Laroui's *L'idéologie* is followed by what is often regarded as its Arab language sequel, *al-'arab wa al-fikr al-tarikhi* (Arabs and Historical Thinking), comprising a set of essays that elaborate and define some of the key themes that Laroui raises in his earlier work.

Together, these works present us with the major features of Laroui's political theoretical project and serve to illuminate the rest of Laroui's corpus. Laroui's political theory consists in providing a critique of Arab political subjectivity in the guise of a cultural critique, as well as a theory for how to effect the transformation of that subjectivity. In large part, Laroui does this through the mobilization of rhetorical strategies (e.g., creating dissonance, disjuncture, and discomfort) that try to enact a transformation in the way his Arab reader understands, and engages with, the political world. The "reader" that our author has in mind is the Arab intellectual (and the political leader insofar as he too is an "intellectual"), who for Laroui represents the Arab political subject *par excellence*, who embodies, simultaneously, the maladies of postcolonial modernity and the agentival capacity for change. The transformative potential of Laroui's ideological critique consists in his inhabitation of the various modes of conceiving the world put forward by Arab intellectuals since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, and through this inhabitation, his explication and deconstruction of these modes of understanding the Arab self, its historical trajectory, and its future prospects. As this chapter will argue at some length, Laroui's political theory consists in his examination of Arab political subjectivity through his analysis of modes of approaching authority and community that have pervaded modern Arab thought. It also consists in his attempt to transform these modes through rhetorical inhabitation and subversion.

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<sup>16</sup> All quotations from Laroui in this chapter are my English translations of Arabic versions of his works unless otherwise indicated.

Besides elucidating the political theory in Laroui's work, a task that had hitherto not been done in English language commentaries on this thinker<sup>17</sup>, this chapter also contests the claim that Laroui is a liberal, rather than a Marxist, thinker<sup>18</sup>. Specifically, it does so through underscoring how Laroui's understands his conception of history and the role of the intellectual to be inspired by the Marxist tradition<sup>19</sup>. In line with that tradition, Laroui conceives of cultural critique as primarily the examination of the modes of consciousness that correspond to particular stages of sociopolitical development, and of the significant role that the intellectual could play in accelerating, compressing, or even "leaping" over, some of these stages. Laroui's understanding of this culture has two facets. On the one hand, it is the mode of understanding the world associated with a particular level of socioeconomic development, or what he often refers to as "ideology." On the other, it is the exercise of critiquing and transforming this mode of consciousness in Third World contexts to enable them to move beyond their current stage of "historical backwardness" vis-à-vis the West, which for Laroui comprises the domain of culture as the vocation of the intellectual. These two senses of culture map onto Laroui's characterization of the 'malady' and the 'cure' of the Arab condition. The malady for our author consists in the "traditionalism" that predominates contemporary Arab modes of inhabiting their reality, and which consists in the conception of history, as the domain of divine will rather than that of human agency. The cure in Laroui's view is "historicism," a mode of understanding history as produced by the human subject's agency, that, in Laroui's estimate, is only truly so called if that agency propels the historical subject's forward through the "stages" delineated by Marx's historiography. This chapter suggests that Laroui's critique attempts to teach his Arab intellectual-reader this understanding of history, and having done that, to persuade him that his role consists in cultivating an Arab subjectivity that conceives of progress as an agentive movement along a progressive scale, and in accelerating the pace through which this movement occurs. This chapter suggests that instead of being conceived as "liberal," Laroui's later works should be interpreted as one such attempt at producing historical movement through "assimilating the fruits of liberalism, before or without, living through the liberal stage" (1973, 7).

Despite his conception of history as advancement along the scale put forward by Western modernity, this chapter also argues that Laroui's understanding of the "end" of that scale does not consist in the unconditional embrace of Western modernity, but in the production of "specific" modes of modernity that transform and transcend the Western modular form through assimilating it in new and unique ways. Likewise, Laroui does not understand the current sociopolitical stage of development of Arab societies, and that of the Third World more generally, to represent the "past" of the West, the "liberal modernization theory" view that Laroui repeatedly contests in his writings. Instead, together with notable 1970s Arab leftists like Anwar Abdel Malek and Samir Amin,

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<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the only reference to Laroui as a "political theorist" that we find is in an interview that Nancy Ghallagher conducts with him in 1998 where she refers to him as "a Moroccan historian and political theorist who has written widely on Arab affairs" (132).

<sup>18</sup> In his *Contemporary Arab Thought*, Ibrahim Abu Rabi' titles his chapter on Laroui, "From Objective Marxism to Liberal Etatism," (344-370), likewise in *Arab Modernities*, Jaafar Aksikas (2009) titles his chapter on Laroui, "Arab Liberalism: Abdallah Laroui and the Politics of the End of History" (33-69).

<sup>19</sup> Besides the influence of the early Marx (especially the Marx of *The German Ideology*), Laroui (1973) mentions that his notion of cultural critique and the role of the intellectual is heavily influenced by Lenin's and Gramsci's writings (169).

Laroui believes that the backward economic, social, and political state of Arab society is very much a product of colonial distortion of the material, political, and cultural realities in that society; continued underdevelopment is a product of neo-colonial capitalism rather than a symptom of a “stage” on the modernization scale (1973, 183-190). The historical trajectory of Arab society does not map onto that of the West, neither in its “beginning” or its prospective “end.” The specificities of the Arab trajectory aside, Laroui understands the general thrust of the Marxist account of Western socioeconomic development to be applicable beyond the Western context. It is in this sense that Laroui calls for the adoption of a “Marxist historicism” as a guiding creed for Arab intellectual activity. Indeed, the critique and transformation of the Arab public’s mode of understanding its sociopolitical condition or “reality,” and the production of a “specific” mode of Arab modernity are the tasks that Laroui assigns his political subject *par excellence*, the Arab intellectual.

### **I. The Intellectual as the Arab Subject *Par Excellence***

Laroui’s seminal *Contemporary Arab Ideology* locates the reason for continued “Arab backwardness” in the problematic constitution of the “mental apparatus” of the Arab subject—namely, in the persistence of what he terms “traditionalism” and “eclecticism” in the way the subject understands and acts on social reality. Despite his suggestion that this critique applies to the Arab citizen at large, Laroui is particularly preoccupied with the constitution of the Arab intellectual (1973, 24). This preoccupation stems from his consideration of the intellectual as the chief carver and disseminator of the ideological currents that animate the Arab political elite, and, equally importantly, as the primary agent of social and political change in Third World societies. Indeed, Laroui’s extensive engagement with the Arab intellectual and his embeddedness in particular historical and intellectual currents suggests that an adequate understanding of that intellectual is important for diagnosing the ills of the Arab condition, and for identifying the prospects for transforming it. In so doing, Laroui seems to recognize that his claim entails “treading upon very sensitive territory, because it gestures at the responsibility of the Arab intellectual for the continued backwardness of Arab thought, and in turn, for the continued backwardness of Arab politics and Arab society, although that intellectual could be seen expressing his desire for change on every possible platform” (1973, 10). And while our author occasionally indicates that an analysis of the “cultural condition” is but one among several possible routes to understanding the problem of Arab backwardness, his critique elevates the subjectivity of the Arab intellectual – and the discourses formative of and formed by that figure – to a principal position in his account of that problem, its genesis, and its prospective solution. Laroui’s understanding of “culture,” or intellectual labor, as key to the sociopolitical transformation of the Arab condition can only be understood in the context of his definition of “historical backwardness” as the unique temporality inhabited by the “Third World” vis-à-vis the modern West<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Whereas I provide a preliminary charting of Laroui’s conception of “historical backwardness” in this section, the full scope of this notion does not become clear until my discussion of Laroui’s conception of history (which he refers to as “historicism”) in section IV of this chapter.

This double significance of the intellectual, as representative of malady and as agent of change, can be discerned in two of Laroui's central works: *Contemporary Arab Ideology* and *Arabs and Historical Thinking*,<sup>21</sup> both of which take the intellectual as the primary subject of investigation and prospective reform. In both works, Laroui's consideration of the intellectual's constitution as representative of that of the Arab individual at large (1973) is most clear in his sustained critique of *salafism*, the bearer of "traditionalist thought that predominates over most of the Arab public, even within progressive parties" (24) – including the majority of intellectuals (185).<sup>22</sup> In taking the intellectual as the subject of his critique, therefore, Laroui seems to be engaging in a dual mission: subjecting the Arab individual in general to an epistemological critique, and underlining the significance of that critique for the Arab intellectual, who is conceived as the primary agent of social change and whose composition is simultaneously reflective and constitutive of the Arab public (22).

Even in his later works, Laroui's maintains allegiance to "an enlightened elite" as the agent best equipped to effect social and political change.<sup>23</sup> In *From the Realm of Politics*, for instance, Laroui (2009) posits that developing a democratic interpretation of the constitution is the primary prerequisite for instituting political change in Morocco, and that such an interpretation would have to overcome its *salafi* counterpart in order to prevail. But the labor of producing such an interpretation and putting it into effect, Laroui adds, hinges on the predominance of a social force whose elite "speaks the language of secular law as opposed to that of religious law or *shari'a*" (122). Here we see Laroui emphasizing the significance of "access to the dominant political structure," i.e. to political authority or the ruling elite, as a precondition to effecting democratic change.

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<sup>21</sup> These two works are usually considered sequels to each other. Put together, they are seen as the founding premises of Laroui's intellectual project, and are therefore the ones often discussed by Laroui's commentators despite the existence of a body of work that Laroui produces in later years (1990s and 2000s). See for instance Kassab's (2010) discussion on Laroui in *Contemporary Arab Thought* (82-91), Kamal Abdul Latif's Kamal Abdellatif's (2008) *al-fikr al-falsafi fi al-maghrib* (Philosophical Thought in Morocco), and Ibrahim Abu Rabi's (2004) *Contemporary Arab Thought* (345-369) entry on Laroui. Though written in the 2000s, these three accounts rely on Laroui's early work to examine his thought.

<sup>22</sup> Laroui's "salafism" (and, refers to the Islamic reformist projects of Jamal Ad-din al- Afghani and Mohamed 'Abduh in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and to subsequent cultural and political reform projects informed by the Islamic reformist trajectory. What Laroui understands by salafism, as we shall later see in his depiction of the "cleric," is not the antipathy to "Western modernity" values or the quest to "return" to a glorious Islamic past embodied in the early Islamic period. Rather, Laroui understands salafism as the epistemology that conceives of historical progress as resulting from a "return to origins," those being the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition. In venturing to "return" to that past, the *salafi* reinterprets the origin in light of his embeddedness in a particular time and place. It is in this sense, for instance, that Laroui understands the cleric's 'return' to the origin in the colonial context as imbuing the text with modern understandings of "reason" and "freedom" to which the cleric is exposed upon the colonial encounter. The salafi is thus an "Islamic rationalist" to use Euben's (1999) term, but his salafism (i.e. his emulation of the "righteous predecessors," *al-salaf al-saleh*) consists in his epistemology rather in the interpretive content of his creed.

<sup>23</sup> For a competing interpretation, see Abu Rabi's (2004) contention that Laroui changed course from considering the intellectual the agent of political change to considering the state that agent. Abu Rabi contends that Laroui "no longer shows interest in in the reproduction of ideology in contemporary Arab world and the role that the intelligentsia plays in supporting political authority...and sincerely believes that the Moroccan state has been the most powerful agent of modernization in Moroccan history and that it should be supported" (368). Kassab (2010) contests Abu Rabi's claim as "too harsh" in a footnote to the section on Laroui in her work, without offering a rationale for her contention (380).

Yet his contention is less about a particular elite gaining access to political power, and more about the intellectual project that such an elite would introduce: namely, effecting a democratic interpretation of the constitution at hand. Indeed, this perception of the political leader as identical to, or a vehicle of, the intellectual and his labor is an image that Laroui's reader comes across frequently in his earlier as in his later work<sup>24</sup>. What is important to note here is the continued centrality of the intellectual as the ultimate resort in effecting cultural and political change in Laroui's body of work.

Laroui's belief in the centrality of cultural transformation, spearheaded by the figure of the intellectual, connotes a conviction in the precedence of cultural change over political or socioeconomic change. In choosing "cultural analysis" as the domain in which to analyze continued Arab backwardness, and in specifying the intellectual as the primary agent of social and political change, Laroui seems to be making a curious choice for a Marxist thinker<sup>25</sup>. Indeed, Laroui himself gestures at the apparent counter-intuitiveness of his choice of "cultural analysis" as the approach through which to examine what he identifies as "the evident faltering in the Moroccan elite's performance in the political and cultural realms ten years after having attained national independence" (1995, 23). Instead, Laroui adds, "it would have seemed logical, in order to understand this phenomenon, to conduct an analysis of the political and social conditions in Morocco. But nothing prevents us, at least theoretically, from paving the way for such analysis through a study of the cultural condition. And this is the method I have chosen for this work" (ibid). What initially seems like a personal preference for studying contemporary Arab culture later becomes both a logical and theoretical choice on Laroui's part. Examining the mental composition of Moroccan leaders, Laroui states a paragraph later, is logically prior to examining their policies and their impact on the social, economic, and political condition. "Isn't it incumbent upon us," Laroui enquires, "before judging the accomplishments of the Moroccan elite in politics and in culture, to first study the composition of their mental apparatus?" The study of that mental apparatus, or the constellation of "terms, concepts, expressions and metaphors" that constitutes one's thought, comprises Laroui's entry point into examining the structure of Arab ideology and the modes of political subjectivity it had given rise to since the time of the Arab *Nahda*.

A legitimate counter-argument to Laroui's positing of the logical priority of cultural to political or socioeconomic analysis would be that the constitution of a subject's "mental apparatus" is itself dependent on that subject's embeddedness in

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<sup>24</sup> For an example, see Laroui's reference to his work as motivated by what he perceives as the "ideological deficiency" of the Arab political elite, and as attempting to "modernize the mentality of Arab political leaders" through cultural critique (AHT, 18 and 141 respectively).

<sup>25</sup> That is not to say that Marx does not emphasize the role of the intellectual, or an intellectual vanguard, in effecting a proletariat revolution; but the role that Marx reserves for the intellectual assumes that a certain level of development of social and economic development is already in place. The intellectual vanguard then represents a 'catalytic agent' that educates and mobilizes the *real* agent of historical transformation, the proletariat. The role that Laroui proposes for the Arab intellectual is thus more radical, in the sense that this agent is not merely considered a mobiliser of existing historical condition, but the agent who could bring this condition (liberalism and capitalism) into being in the first place. This is provided that the historical possibility of bringing about such a change as I note in the final section of this chapter. Needless to mention, Laroui's view of the role of the intellectual is heavily influenced by Lenin and Gramsci's works, which he occasionally references in that regard, but whose traces are unmistakable in his writing.

particular sociological and political formations (class, tribe, sect, elite, etc.). This would then reverse the logic of Laroui's proposition in favor of one more in line with Marxist orthodoxy. Indeed, Laroui himself occasionally gestures at how the affiliation to a particular class or political formation conditions the constitution of the intellectual's "mental apparatus" (1973, 177-206)... but the role of ideology/culture in forming the intellectual's "mental apparatus" remains the decisive factor in his scheme. This apparent "inversion" of the relationship between the realms of thought (culture, theory, ideology) and socio-economics, which designates the former as primary to the latter is, Laroui argues, a result of the condition of "historical backwardness" of Arab society. Arab backwardness, Laroui notes, implies that the advanced Western other is always a presence on the Arab self's horizon, a presence whose ideas are to be examined, critiqued, and emulated, and whose history is conceived by the self as its future, or "*futur-antérieur*," a future that has already been experienced as past by someone else (1995, 89). The historical backwardness of the Arab condition effectively means that the Arab intellectual is always confronted with a pool of ready-made ideas and "modes of consciousness" from which he or she is compelled to choose, like an "archaeologist digging for the roles through which Western consciousness had gone in its past" (57). These choices then influence the intellectual universe in which the political elite operates and in which the Arab political subject is cultivated. Laroui cites the example of the role played by the Arab intellectual in informing the politics of Nasser, Ben Bella, and Ben Baraka in Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco, pointing out how the "ideological deficiency" of that intellectual had gravely impacted the political direction in each of these contexts<sup>26</sup> (1973, 18).

Importantly, what Laroui discerns here is that the status of Arab society as historically backward means that examining the constitution of Arab culture and the Arab intellectual assumes political significance in a way it never did in modern Western history, where the relationship between "material" and "ideal" reality was precisely the reverse. As Laroui notes,

In the course of the evolution of European mentality, practical experience, whether economic or political, came prior to ideology and theory, i.e. mentalities always expressed material conditions that preceded their formation. This constituted the basis of philosophical materialism as is well known. But in our case, the case of a revolution to overcome historical backwardness, the relationship is inverted: theory precedes the condition which it is supposed to express; the image of the society for which revolutionaries strive is already engraved in their minds and imaginations before it actually materializes, and the theorist dictates the direction of the politician (1973, 172: translation mine).

The relationship between the "theory" that the intellectual imports and the "society" which he or she inhabits is therefore incongruent: the concepts that the Arab intellectual uses to understand and represent the Arab condition are laden with socioeconomic connotations, not those of the intellectual's habitat, but of their land of origin in Europe. "There is at the heart of every mode of consciousness [that the Arab intellectual imports

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<sup>26</sup> Laroui defines that "ideological deficiency" as the "retardation of mentalities when compared to the general socio-economic condition [of Arab society]" (19).

and inhabits] a particular class connotation, but that connotation does not originate in our society,” Laroui surmises (1995, 61). This is precisely why a study of the Arab social, economic, and political condition would not adequately inform a study of contemporary Arab culture. In view of the importance of culture to instituting political change in a Third World context, the study of culture and its agent (the intellectual)<sup>27</sup> becomes paramount as well as primary to economic, social, or political analysis.

In addition to developing a critique of Arab culture and the Arab intellectual, Laroui offers an alternative that would address the problems he identifies with extant ideological frameworks and the subjectivities they cultivate or consolidate. Laroui occasionally hints at the way his works are consciously “customized” for the audience, in whom he foresees the promise of political agency. We see this, for instance, when Laroui retrospectively considers *Contemporary Arab Ideology* an attempt to counsel progressive intellectuals on the importance of adopting a rigorous theoretical framework, and to offer political leadership a treatise about the inadequacy of the “nationalist” ideology of the time (1973, 18).

These declarations of intent fail to capture the transformative potential of what Laroui’s texts actually try to perform, however, namely, the enactment of a new mode of political subjectivity in the Arab reader, through the dual processes of de-mystification and persuasion. The first, de-mystification, operates through offering a critique of the “modes of consciousness”<sup>28</sup> that pervade the Arab intellectual and political life from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and up until the post-independence era (1967), unveiling the “mental apparatus” underlying each of these modes and unearthing the internal contradictions that inhere in their assumptions and propositions. The second, persuasion, tries to persuade Laroui’s Arab reader (the intellectual and political leader) to adopt an alternative way of thinking about and acting on the Arab condition that remedies the problems of the extant modes.

Perhaps the closest Laroui comes to expressing the transformative intent of his work is when we see him wondering about the possibility of the emergence of revolutionary leaders in a “historically backward” setting like Arab society: i.e., leaders who would be steeped in that backwardness and deeply familiar with its implications while at the same time capable of attaining a critical distance from their context that would enable them to understand and transform it. In other words, Laroui poses the classical question of how a subject could be produced by a certain context without necessarily being over-determined by it, and comments on how even theories that posit “revolutionary determinism” in backward societies do not develop an account for the

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<sup>27</sup> The words culture, *thaqafa*, and intellectual, *muthaqqaf*, both stem from the same root in Arabic: *th-q-f*. The word intellectual literally translates into the “bearer of culture.”

<sup>28</sup> In *Contemporary Arab Ideology*, Laroui variously refers to Islamism, liberalism and nationalism as “modes of consciousness or *wai’i*” or “ideologies”. I use the former because I believe it does a better job of capturing the depth with which Laroui describes how these “modes” condition the way their holder comes to define the Arab self, understand its history, and envision its future. Later in *Arabs and Historical Thinking*, Laroui speaks of two “modes” which he understands to embody the two predominant ideologies in postcolonial time: traditionalism and eclecticism (traditionalism connotes Islamism, and eclecticism as nationalism’s attempts to forge a blend between Western and traditional understandings of progress). Once more, the extent to which he delineates their impact on the Arab intellectual and political leader goes further than producing a “mental” effect. By Laroui’s own account, their impact operates on both the “mental” and “psychic” and “emotional” levels (1973, p. 23 and 84 for use of “psyche,” p. 24 for use of “mentality,” and p.149 for use of “emotion”)



emergence of the revolutionary individual (17). Here, we find Laroui enquiring, “How can a revolutionary be cultivated? How can a reformer be a reformed?” (ibid) And while Laroui does not explicitly cite his works as attempts to take on that task, we could deduce from his works that such questions are exactly what animate his intellectual project.

A close examination of his texts, most especially *CAI* and *AHT*, reveals how they seek to enact the transformation they speak of—the cultivation of a revolutionary subject—in their reader, through theoretical and rhetorical means. Accordingly, in what follows, I will trace the critique that Laroui develops of the “modes of consciousness” that pervade Arab politics, highlighting the kinds of political subjectivity that these modes entail. I will then examine how the ideological alternative that Laroui proposes to these “modes of consciousness” implies a novel political subjectivity, specifying what that subjectivity is. My reading of Laroui offers a two-tier analysis of his work: the first brings to light the author’s own critique of the Arab intellectual, and his proposition of an alternative mode of consciousness for that subject. The second discerns the transformative impact that this critique tries to inculcate in its reader. The two effects are inter-related, but not identical. Put together they delineate the contours of a political theoretical project that takes “cultural analysis” as its initiating platform, a move that we see echoed in post-1967 Arab thought more generally, including the projects of Hanafi and Jabiri.

### III. Laroui’s Typology as a Critique of Political Subjectivity

Commentaries on Laroui’s work often invoke his tripartite typology of the cleric, the liberal, and the technophile to provide a summary account of his critique of Arab ideology, and of the reasons underlying its failure to overcome the state of “Arab backwardness.”<sup>29</sup> To be sure, one of the aims of Laroui’s typology is to offer such an account<sup>30</sup>. What these commentaries fail to capture, however, is the extent to which Laroui’s critique of these types is in fact a critique of three modes of subjectivity, i.e., three modes of knowing, understanding, feeling, and experiencing social reality<sup>31</sup>. This is precisely what Laroui alludes to when he refers to these figures as “modes of consciousness, *ashkal al-wai’i*” that are formative of each figure’s self-understanding and which define the limits of what is intelligible in each of their experiences (1995, 49-56). In other words, Laroui’s typology provides more than a critique of how Arab intellectuals

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<sup>29</sup> For commentaries that discuss Laroui’s typology in such a manner see Abu Rabi’ (2004) and Kassab (2010).

<sup>30</sup> In point of fact, Laroui does not put this “aim” up front when he embarks on his typology in *CAI*, which he initially designates as a way of illustrating how the West is implicated in all currents of Arab ideology (p.38). Rather, Laroui allows his reader to come to a gradual realization that his typology aims at achieving no less than an all-out critique of Arab ideology as incapable of grasping the reality of the Arab condition. It is not until p. 71 of *CAI*, for instance, that Laroui’s reader is presented with a statement that seems to encapsulate Laroui’s objective. In the context of discussing the inability of the Arab petty bourgeoisie to capture the reality of Arab society and economy, Laroui infers that “...this is but another result of the disjuncture between consciousness and reality that pervades our society.” Though the first of its kind in the book, Laroui makes this inference in an off-hand manner, as though counting on the fact that the typology and its rhetorical tropes had already lead us to expect such a punch-line. Indeed, it is in this sense that Laroui later refers to *CAI* as a book written in a “pedagogical” style (1973, 21).

<sup>31</sup> For more how “consciousness” refers to the way the subject experiences reality on the psychological and emotional levels, and not only on the level of mental cognition, see footnote 9.

envision “model political forms” or of their prescriptions about how to get there; rather, this typology offers its reader an experience of what it might have meant to be one of these figures in the particular historical moments they inhabited.

Laroui’s commentators fall short of noting how “impersonation” as a rhetorical technique is significant in and of itself, not merely as a way of elucidating ideological concepts, but in reproducing the experience of an entire mode of being and of knowing the world for Laroui’s Arab reader. This “reproduction” helps Laroui offer a systematic demystification of each of these modes, armed not only with the persuasiveness of his theoretical argument, but with an ability to gradually uncover for his reader the premises of each mode while inhabiting it. This is precisely why Laroui refers to the typology as a “phenomenological account” and to his deployment of it as a “pedagogical, persuasive” tool in a later commentary on *CAI*<sup>32</sup>. In my presentation of Laroui’s typology, I will try to mimic Laroui’s rhetorical style in order to present a sense of how Laroui’s dual technique of demystification and persuasion actually operates.

Laroui’s typology features the cleric, whose presence is most salient during the time of colonial rule and resistance; the liberal political leader, whose ideas are embodied when Arab states were granted a nominally independent status but were effectively still under colonial control; and the technophile, whose outlook corresponds to the formative stages of the post-colonial nation-state. To this, one could also add Laroui’s depiction of “nationalism” as the postcolonial (specifically Nasserist) mode of consciousness that appropriates the “technicist” claims of the technophile and blends them with the “traditionalist” claims of the cleric. Indeed, it is to this particular “blend” that Laroui (1973) refers when he later speaks of “traditionalism and eclecticism” as the two predominant trends in Arab ideology (41). Whereas Laroui’s exposition of the cleric and the liberal configures them as two distinct modes of consciousness, his figuration of the “technophile,” who believes in “industry” as the only viable modality of instituting change, swiftly slides into an account of “nationalist” consciousness. Nationalism in Laroui’s understanding is the ideology that pervades the postcolonial Eastern Arab states (Egypt, Syria and Iraq) and attempts to blend the technical rationality of the technophile more “authentic” by grounding it in “traditionalist” (cleric-style) claims about the inherent “modernity” of the Arab-Islamic heritage. In the following discussion, I shall use the expression technophile-cum-nationalist to refer to this historical entwinement between the technophilic and nationalist modes of consciousness in Laroui’s narrative<sup>33</sup>. I also use it to underline the tension that Laroui finds in the two contending

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<sup>32</sup> Laroui (1976) refers to his work as “phenomenological” in the preface to *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual*, p. ix. The commentary on *CAI* he offers in his *Arabs and Historical Thinking*, 1973, pp. 16-17.

<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to note in this context how Laroui’s view of nationalism as an essentially eclectic ideology (i.e., as consisting in an amalgam of two disparate modes of consciousness) runs counter to historical European formulations of nationalism as a unique mode of consciousness specific to particular peoples. We find an example of this conception of nationalism in Herder’s notion of an “inherent and creative national soul that exists within every national organism” and of “every nationality as bear[ing] within itself the standards of its perfection, totally independent of all comparisons with that of others” (as quoted in Robert Ergang, 1966. *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism*. New York: Octagon Books. p. 85 and 98 respectively). Herder’s understanding of nationalism as a pure, homogenous, and specific to a particular “national organism” contrasts with Laroui’s understanding of it as eclectic and derivative of two realms, Western modernity and traditionalism, none of which captures the specificity of the Arab postcolonial condition.

(“traditionalist” and “positivist”) components of Arab nationalism in the late 1960s, as we shall see later in this section.

Laroui is careful to note that the emergence of each of these figures, or “modes of consciousness,” predates the time of its salience and lives long after its passing, but that he is most interested in scrutinizing their nature and impact at the time when they assume historical centrality. Most important among these concerns are four issues that together comprise what Laroui terms the “collective Arab predicament” since the time of colonialism: defining the Arab self, understanding its history, charting its future path, and devising a mode of self-expression that is particular to its condition yet accessible to all of humanity. What Laroui presents here is essentially a portrayal of how Arab thought as embodied in these figures has tried time and again to develop an adequate account of Arab backwardness relative to its Western other through the tropes of identity and alterity, history and continuity, and universality and specificity in the wake of three defining moments in modern Arab history. In each of these modes, “backwardness” is perceived both as real (in the sense of having its basis in the Arab social and economic condition), and as relative (as one that is always defined through reference to an other who is perceived as more advanced, and in whose gaze the Arab is viewed as “backward”).

Most significant for our purposes here is to note that each of the modes of Arab consciousness that Laroui presents us with entails a particular model of political subjectivity: a specific way of relating to authority, of arbitrating legitimacy, of conceiving of participation in political life, of evaluating the performance of political leadership, and of understanding the common good. Equally important is to recognize that the critique Laroui offers of these modes of consciousness also includes a critique of these modalities of political subjectivity.

The first and most radical of Laroui’s claims about the cleric, the liberal, and the nationalist is that none of them offers a genuinely “authentic” mode of Arab subjectivity. That is to say, none of these figures proposes a conception of self, history, and progress that is singularly loyal to the “Arab-Islamic heritage.” While this may be expected in the case of the liberal, both the cleric and the technophile-cum-nationalist stake the legitimacy of their vision on such claims of authenticity<sup>34</sup>. Laroui makes this argument by unveiling the way each of these discourses defines the Arab self and stipulates how its path in history is infused with conceptions of the “Western other.” Laroui’s second critique of these three modes of consciousness rests on the argument that they all fail to comprehend the logic according to which Western modernity operates. Because it is this particular logic that reigns supreme in the colonial and postcolonial world, all three figures ultimately fail to institute social, economic, and political change.

The cleric in Laroui’s scheme is a member of the indigenous socioeconomic elite during the times immediately preceding colonialism, a member of the “special class, *al-khassa*” (1995, 51) who comprise a group that “serves the landowning class” (1973, 24)<sup>35</sup>. Laroui paints the image of a figure who perceives the relationship between the

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<sup>34</sup> The Islamist is the striking example of the claim to authenticity, but the nationalist, with his appeal to the importance of linguistic purity and historical glory partakes in that claim as well.

<sup>35</sup> Laroui uses Muhammad ‘abduh (1849-1905), the Egyptian Islamic reformer, as the prime historical example of the cleric, but stresses that the cleric need not actually be a religious figure, but is any intellectual who espouses this “mode of consciousness” (p.)

Arab self and its Western other as defined by a difference in religious creed, and whose understanding of the faltering of Arab nations involves inevitable calamity prescribed by the necessity of divine testing of the faithful that befalls all beings, and finds its resolution in the workings of time. The cleric could have thus reconciled himself to colonialism, had he not been incessantly provoked out of his calm composure by an enemy who speaks of “the resumption of the crusades” and who reminds him “that the land of Islam had been Christian until forced to change its creed, citing Rome and St. Augustine as examples,” all the while attributing Islam’s defeat to “its prejudice and superstition”(40). Further still, the cleric hears his colonizer claim that the West is the beacon of reason, freedom, and humanism, and that Islamic teachings contradict all three. Compelled out of his silence, the cleric now begins a quest for “reasons for strength and defeat” by returning to the only reference point which he deems legitimate: religious texts (ibid). In these texts, he finds in Islam the religion of tolerance, of faith after rational deliberation, and of freedom from submission to any earthly rule or being. He puzzles over how Christianity, with its belief in myth and its premise in miracles, could speak of reason, and how the West with its persecution of mavericks from Galileo to Bruno could make a claim to freedom.

The cleric thus arrives at the conclusion that the secret of the West’s progress lies in its departure from Christian creed, whereas Islam’s downfall lies in its divergence from Islamic teachings. He thereby concludes that there exist two distinct Islams: “one sublime, authentic, and untainted by the workings of time, and another subject to the whims of Muslims, perverted and maimed [by their doings] throughout past generations and centuries” (1995, 41)/ Islamic history is destined to resume its progressive path as soon as Muslims admit to their mistakes and return to the edicts of their faith<sup>36</sup> (ibid). With this conciliatory act, the cleric regains his balance and posits a formula that no empirical evidence could possibly refute: the reason for Muslim defeat lies not in Islam, but in Muslims.

What is important to note in Laroui’s portrayal is how the cleric’s understanding of the Arab predicament entails a particular modality of reform. This modality involves a return to a particular origin, the “untainted Islam” found in holy texts and in the life of the prophet and his companions. This return is conditioned upon the formation of a subjectivity that accesses social reality through a belief in the existence of an immutable truth that could be discerned and emulated, and that, when unclear, could be established through a process of “consensus”: it relies upon agreement around the nature of a pre-existing truth, rather than a process of concession or compromise which gives rise to pragmatic, ephemeral “truths,” as in the liberal understanding (1995, 170)<sup>37</sup>.

But the cleric’s quest, purist and loyal to an original form as it may seem, is very much shaped by the encounter with the modern colonial West. Laroui hints at how the Western claim to reason and freedom prompts the cleric’s hunt for the genesis of Muslim defeat; a few pages later, the author presents us with a thorough-going demystification of

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<sup>36</sup> Here, Laroui gives the example of ‘allal al-Fasi (1910-1974), the Moroccan Islamic reformer, in that context. Here Fasi insists “all the universal emancipatory ideas that we believe in today we could find roots for in the Islamic revolution, though we have deviated from its path and allowed myth to shield its truths” (66).

<sup>37</sup> For a preliminary critique of Laroui’s depiction of the cleric’s understanding of history, see the conclusion to this chapter. For a more extended critique of that position, see the conclusion to the dissertation.

how the cleric's logic is thoroughly penetrated by the West's definition of itself and perception of the Muslim other. Laroui argues that the cleric's point of departure for defining the nature of true Islam and the true Muslim subject begins with his provocation by Western portrayals of Islam (1995, 53). Further, Laroui traces how the cleric's responses to Western allegations are themselves premised on a particular idea of what constitutes the essence of Western modernity, and that his subsequent "formulation of what comprises Arab-Islamic identity is based on what that idea [of Western modernity] expresses or conceals" (ibid). Things are further complicated by the fact that the cleric's "idea" of what defines the modern West is based upon what his Western counterpart claims, and not on an independent evaluation of modern Western history and how contemporary Western reality (of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century) figures according to that trajectory. The reason for this confusion is that the cleric's "counterpart," his questioner and interlocutor in the West, comes from an institution that has become marginal to shaping socioeconomic and political reality in the West—namely, the clergy—and that holds on to an obsolete representation of "the West"<sup>38</sup>. "What defines the West is an ethic of ceaseless work and an endless demand for freedom," the cleric's Western interlocutor submits (54). The cleric adopts this definition unquestioningly and uses it to redefine what he sees as the real Islam, now defined as "a continuous quest for human activity and freedom" that deeply contradicts the present Muslim condition (ibid).

Laroui's account of the cleric is a portrayal of how the colonial Islamist consciousness of the colonial period suffers from two kinds of mystification. On one level, the cleric apprehends the West according to an epistemology (inspired by religious doctrine) that fails to capture the essence of Western superiority in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that of capitalist-driven modern industry. On a second level, the cleric's confusion is furthered by those whom the West delegates to be his interlocutors, the clergy and the orientalist<sup>39</sup>, neither of whom represents the contemporary West<sup>40</sup>. The cleric then bases his (re)interpretation of Islamic texts on the understanding of Western modernity that these interlocutors offer him.

Ultimately, Laroui bases his dual critique of the cleric, and the Islamic reformism of 19<sup>th</sup> century more generally, on that figure's (mis)understanding of Western modernity. First, Laroui's analysis illustrates that the cleric's singular claim to Arab-Islamic authenticity does not hold to scrutiny. Rather, Laroui elucidates that the discourse of the cleric is in effect a product of the *modern* condition, as embodied in the colonial

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<sup>38</sup> Laroui identifies the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century (namely after the revolutions of 1848) as a point where the West begins to lose its initial vigor and belief in the principles of Enlightenment. This loss is further deepened by the colonial experience (1995, 85).

<sup>39</sup> Laroui notes that, at that historical juncture, orientalism as a discipline was closely tied to the Christian church due to a variety of reasons (55).

<sup>40</sup> Note here that Laroui does not consider this misrepresentation of the West an intentional act of misleading the cleric (who is considered a political leader in his local milieu). Instead, Laroui argues that the West puts the Christian clergy forward as interlocutors of the cleric because "the religious mode of consciousness" is the only level at which communication between the two parties could actually take place given the level of social differentiation of Arab society at the time (1995, 55). This, of course adds to the complication of the scene. For, whereas the Muslim cleric is considered a leader (religious and political) in his local milieu, the Christian cleric of late 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Europe is "marginalized from the epicenter of Western society's motion" that lies with the "modern industrial sector" led by the capitalist class (ibid).

encounter<sup>41</sup>. This runs in stark contrast to Islamism's claim that it represents a continuation of an historical mode of consciousness that finds its roots in medieval Islam<sup>42</sup>. Laroui's account shows how the cleric embarks on his reform project armed with an understanding of modernity that is no longer current, which deems him incapable of engaging in an effective dialogue with his colonizer or understanding the processes entailed in colonialism (1995, 55). More importantly, the cleric's partial and distorted understanding of Western modernity means that he does not come to understand it as a process, featuring various historical stages that flow from one another (i.e., as a secular historical process)<sup>43</sup>. Instead, the cleric could only access Western modernity as a series of distinct moments relating to convergence with, reform of, or divergence from religious doctrine. Because of this misreading, the only conception of modernity that the cleric can grasp is that of Religious Reformation, and it is in that sense that the cleric comes to "embody the consciousness of Martin Luther" (61). Laroui's second critique amounts to a damning conclusion: with no effective dialogue with the Western colonizer and without an adequate understanding of the logic of Western modernity that controls the now-colonized Arab states, the cleric's attempts to institute social and political change come to naught. This critique foregrounds Laroui's later discussion of "traditionalism," the epistemology that predominates contemporary Arab thought and of which the cleric was an early protagonist.

The reactive and apologetic character that Laroui traces in the cleric's discourse is one that he also finds in its liberal and technophile-cum-nationalist counterparts. Both take as their point of departure a particular definition of Western modernity and frame their understanding of Arab selfhood, history, and futurity around it. The liberal conceives Western modernity as begotten by a "mode of political organization," while the nationalist understands its secret as lying in the industrial capacity of the modern West (46). Laroui's critique of the nationalist is more potent and sustained, however. There are two likely reasons for this. First, Laroui writes at a time when Arab nationalism was the reigning ideology in Arab intellectual and political scenes; and submitting it to critique was probably viewed as a timely and potentially effective cause. Second, Laroui considers liberalism's influence as relatively brief (ranging from approximately the 1920s to the 1950s), and its presence as marginal when compared to, say, the "traditionalism" of the cleric, which remains alive and well throughout the liberal and nationalist phases.

Laroui presents a portrait of "the liberal political leader" as a member of the bourgeois class who takes charge of government upon nominal independence in the 1930s, and who comes to understand the West as a form of political organization based on freedom and egalitarianism as the Enlightenment features it. In light of that definition, the liberal now defines the Arab self as historically "free and strong," and understands its continued backwardness as a result of its long subjection to an Ottoman tyranny that suppressed its genuine potential for freedom and progress (44). Ottoman rule aside, the

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<sup>41</sup> Laroui makes this claim more astutely in a later work when he points out that: "Tradition is born in opposition to something; to ideas accompanying foreign merchandise, or to a universally decried liberalism" (1976, 87).

<sup>42</sup> Written in 1967, Laroui's critique prefigures much of what was written later about the modernity of Islamism as a cultural and political discourse as we shall later see with Hanafi and Jabiri.

<sup>43</sup> For more on Laroui's particular understanding of historical processes and historicism, see the following section.

liberal does not shun the Arab-Islamic heritage *in toto*, but reinterprets it to accommodate his new definition of self, history, and change. He sees Islam as a religion featuring genuine “democratic practice” and calling for the necessary earthliness of the political domain (45). He calls for the formation of a subjectivity that undoes and overcomes the ills of Ottoman rule by universal education, political participation, and an opening of the economy to “every active individual” (*ibid*)<sup>44</sup>.

Earnest as the liberal’s attempts are, however, they bear little fruit in a context where the colonizer is effectively still in charge. More importantly, liberal consciousness, though more intimate in its knowledge of the West than its Islamist counterpart, only captures one moment of Western modernity, namely the Enlightenment, and marks it as modernity’s singular essence. Here again, the partiality of the liberal’s view precludes his view of modernity as historical process. Moreover, the liberal’s attempts to harness elements of the Arab-Islamic heritage marks the hazard of “eclecticism,” of grouping inconsistent logics together for purposes of popular mobilization, an ill whose ultimate protagonist remains the technophile-*cum*-nationalist<sup>45</sup>.

The technophile emerges at the juncture where the futility of exercising “liberal” rule in a semicolonial context becomes apparent. A member of the petite bourgeoisie, the technophile revokes the liberal’s illusions about the freedom and egalitarianism of the West, and underscores the unfreedom and exploitation that the colonizer has brought upon the world. He emphasizes not only how Western imperialism belies these values, but also that the real reason for Western supremacy, despite its “illiberal” character, lies in its industrial might. It is according to this view of the West that the technophile revokes claims to the authenticity of Arab-Islamic heritage as irrelevant, and to liberalism as a mode of political organization as inefficient in instituting modernity to late-comers.

Contrary to his Islamist and liberal counterparts, the technophile—and the nation-state for which “industry” represents the guiding creed—no longer views the world as divided between “the past and future, or between slavery and liberty; instead, [it views it] as very simply a division between the strong and the weak, the legitimate and illegitimate sons [of the God of industry].” Armed with this understanding of modernity, the nation-state embarks on cultivating its subjects:

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<sup>44</sup> It is worth noting here that Laroui offers an account of how the cleric’s and the liberal’s experiences morph with changes in their historical context. For instance, he gives an account of how the consciousness of the cleric in early colonial time is one that is balanced, composed, and capable of imposing the “objective” historical methods of ancient Islamic scholars to historical happenings. This continuity in the cleric’s method of observation and recoding with that of historical Islamic scholars was due to the actual “historical continuity” with the Islamic past that was still part of his lived experience in the early 1900s. During the late colonial stage of “liberalism,” when this continuity with the past starts waning and the “liberal” begins to cast doubt on the virtue of Islamic rule, the cleric loses his balance and forges a more “selective” historical reading of Islam as the religion of reason and freedom. Ultimately, in the nation-state when all such historical continuity (in political rule, in lived reality) is perceived to have vanished, the cleric, now desperate and nervous, adopts a more “scripturalist” reading of religious texts (1995, 136-37).

<sup>45</sup> In Laroui’s scheme, the technophile is the intellectual whose emergence prefigures the establishment of the postcolonial nation-state, which, influenced by his ideas, adopts rapid industrialization and bourgeoisie as its guiding creed. (the prototype that Laroui offers of this figure is the Egyptian Salama Mousa).

The nation-state was intent on making us all, in outlook and in garb, in thought and in behavior, in body and in soul, the peers of the fortunate [legitimate] sons, such that God himself would not be able to tell us apart (75).

The emerging postcolonial nation-state, the fruit of the technophile's efforts, is thus intent on introducing a new sensibility to the now-independent Arab subject: a sensibility based on a novel kind of rationality, "technical rationality." Man's efforts are now to be directed towards laboring and transforming nature and employing it for human ends. A subjectivity featuring a variant sense of time, nature, and human activity is thus inaugurated. Here, Laroui notes, "after its victory, the petit-bourgeoisie managed to impose upon the Arab what he had long forgotten: time that was creative, nature that was alive, labor that was rewarding" (76). In short, what the nation-state seeks to enact in its subject is a rapid and systematic process of embourgeoisement; a "rationalization" of all aspects of that subject's existence, in factory as in household<sup>46</sup>.

But the Arab nation-state fails to sustain its striving for this overarching objective. Laroui does not fully explain this failure, but identifies the voluntaristic, rapid, and often partial nature of embourgeoisement (i.e., the defining qualities of postcolonial context) as possible reasons. To retain its legitimacy, the postcolonial nation-state submits to the demand (of the cleric, the brooding liberal, and most importantly, the despairing youth) for indigenizing its claims and "authenticating" them through reinventing historical continuity with the "past"<sup>47</sup>. It now reinvents itself into an "Arab socialism," a state that vows to "hold on to both modern industry and national heritage" at a time when the actual links between the Arabs and their heritage have been all but severed due to the workings of colonial and neocolonial economies (79). It is the problematic appeal to two inconsistent subjectivities, the traditionalist and the "modern-positivist," that represents the most crucial tension in the nation-state's logic in Laroui's estimate<sup>48</sup>. The postcolonial state thus comes to feature a partially embourgeoisized subject who embodies reason in the factory, but whose family life remains mired in myth and superstition (1973,

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<sup>46</sup> Once more, the kind of "reason" underlying this process of rationalization is what Laroui terms the "technical reason," or, in other renditions as positivist or Cartesian reason. The basis of which is the duality of human and nature, where the former exercises his/her control over the latter in a systematic way to employ it towards human ends. It is also the reason of the petty bourgeoisie, it looks condescendingly on both "humanism and culture" as associated with the bygone era or bourgeois (liberal) rationality (76).

<sup>47</sup> Laroui does not annotate this shift with attendant dates, but he takes as his chief example Nasser's Egypt of the post 1965 period (particularly after 1967). For an autobiographical reference that aptly describes the appeal of Nasser's regime to "heritage-based" sensibilities in the post 1967 war period, see Abdel Moneim Abu el-Fotouh, *A Witness on the History of the Islamist Movement in Egypt*.

<sup>48</sup> It is worth noting that, per Laroui, the rationale for adopting this amalgam on the part of the nation-state is the "logic of rapid achievement" which dominates the newly independent nation-state struggling to achieve a margin of "independence" in a postcolonial Cold War context. This "achievement" is measured according to how closely the form at hand approximates the industrialized economy of the West. Once more, the conception of the West defines the Arab present. The "other" is always-already a presence within the "Arab self" that conditions what that self considers its "reality"—even if the latter does not actually match what this social reality looks like. It is in this sense that Laroui talks about the study of Arab culture as necessary to grasp what Arabs understand their "reality" to be, and of his assertion that this self-understanding as necessarily dialectical, i.e. continuously changing and conditioned on an always shifting definition of the other and, thereby, the self. This is why a "positivist" understanding of Arab social reality (through "indicators" and "figures") is, in Laroui's estimate, hardly sufficient to grasp how the Arab sees that reality, and, subsequently, how he or she engages with it (see p. 25, *CAI*).



167). This is what Laroui calls eclecticism, the logic that dooms that nationalist experience to the same fate of its counterparts—i.e., its incapacity to grasp the logic of modernity.

#### **IV. Traditionalism and Historicism: The Malady and the Cure**

Laroui's typology is meant to leave his Arab reader with two conclusions. The first follows from Laroui's undoing of the "authenticity" of Islamist and nationalist discourses. Though Laroui does not put it in these terms, his typology undoes the binary between "authenticity" and "contemporaneity or modernity" that emerges in the intellectual discourse of the time, and continues to thrive years later, as we shall see with Hanafi and Jabiri. Laroui's analysis reveals that both kinds of discourse—the cleric's on the one hand, and the liberal's and technophile's on the other—are responses to the very new challenges that the conditions of colonialism and postcolonialism pose. Secondly, Laroui's reader is also meant to emerge from reading his *CAI* with the conclusion that even though the ideologies and the subjectivities they feature are "modern" in the sense that they only emerge in the colonial and post-colonial period, they are not "modern" when it comes to the way they understand reality and history. While Laroui insists that it is precisely this divergence that dooms reformist or revolutionary attempts to failure, we are ultimately left in suspense as to exactly how the logic of each of the typological figures diverges from that of "modernity." In other words, absent in this account is a definition of what defines "modernity" and, accordingly, what the specific ways are in which these three modes of consciousness differ from and fail to capture modernity.

It is not until he writes *Arabs and Historical Thinking* that Laroui (1973) provides an incisive account about this disjuncture. In this work that he also offers a programmatic vision for subject-transformation might be enacted to bring into being a mode of consciousness more in line with "modernity." In this work, Laroui's prose also assumes a different character from that of *CAI*, one that is deliberate, definitional, and direct. This stylistic shift seems to follow from Laroui's conception of what his labor in *CAI* has already accomplished: "the lifting of the mental barrier" that mystified the Arab intellectual's understanding of contemporary Arab ideology, such that a certain mental and psychological opening is achieved. This opening, we can infer, is meant to enable the intellectual to "receive" a different mode of understanding social reality. Indeed, it is precisely the strategies that Laroui models in his writing that we later find him prescribing to the Arab progressive: the de-mystification of the "authenticity" of modern-day traditionalism and nationalism through historical and conceptual analysis, the understanding that "traditionalism" is responsible in great part for the failure of Arab attempts at instituting change, and the introduction of an alternative modality of understanding history and reality.

As in *CAI*, however, Laroui's *AHT* deploys a mode of argumentation that he bases on "the logic of utility," as opposed to the logic of normative valuation. His aim is to persuade his Arab reader (the intellectual and political leader) of the comparative advantage of espousing one "mode of consciousness" when compared to another based on an instrumental criteria: namely, which of these modes would give the Arab intellectual the best prism to understand and change an Arab society that has been shaped by colonial and postcolonial conditions? Arab society is conceived here as a "unit" that

has been coerced into integration with a world economy shaped by global capitalism, and that continues to be exploited and oppressed by that modality. It is based on that “logic of utility” that Laroui judges the failure of Arab ideology and its attendant mode of consciousness in producing genuine and sustainable change.

Laroui explains the divergence between the logic of each typological figure and the logic of modernity through three main concepts: traditionalism, eclecticism and historicism. The former is captured by the cleric’s consciousness, and represents by far the most persistent and pervasive epistemology in Arab society, especially after the “traditionalist turn” the Arab nation-state takes in the 1960s<sup>49</sup>. Eclecticism marks the consciousness of the liberal, and more especially, the Arab nationalist, while historicism represents the epistemology that underlies “modernity.” Laroui offers a solid definition of the first and the third, and is more vague about eclecticism which he understands as a blend of incompatible modes of understanding and experiencing reality whose chief hazard lies in its (inadvertent) consolidation of traditionalism.

Laroui gives an example of how this consolidation operates in the Egyptian Nasserist state of the 1960s. Faced with opposition of increasingly dissatisfied masses, the “Arab socialist” state attempts portrays itself as not only one of industry and self-sufficiency, but also as the guarantor of the nation’s “heritage,” its language, religion, and glorious past (1995, 80). In effect, however, what this “inconsistent mélange of ideas and doctrines that fails to understand Arab or Western history” does is entrench traditionalism further in the consciousness of the Arab public through appealing to religion and language (81). In *AHT*, Laroui elaborates on how this “duality” of cultures is maintained by the state through operating a bifurcated educational system in which the army and industrial workers get “modern” technical training while other “general fields” (law, religion, humanities) retain their traditionalist character. In all, however, Laroui’s discussion of eclecticism is brief and largely dependent on his elaboration of the “traditionalism” that it ultimately serves to retain in Arab society.

Laroui bases his definition of traditionalism on an analysis of the history-writing practices of ancient Islamic historians, which he contends is “revived” by the modern day traditionalist, or *salafi*, as Laroui often refers to that figure. He describes two kinds of narrative forms: the first sees post-Islamic history as the continuous repetition of an “origin” that features the various stages of the Islamic message: revelation, proselytization, persecution, victory and conquest, etc. The second conceives history as a period of “absence of” or “fall from” that ideal form. In both narratives, historical events are conceived as mediated by a transcendental will that determines their sequence and

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<sup>49</sup>Laroui’s (1967, 1973) reader could infer from his writings that traditionalism’s persistence is attributable to its existence in multiple “loci”: the psychic make up of the Arab intellectual (and the Arab individual more generally) p. 24, the overarching class affiliation of the Arab intellectual to the petty bourgeoisie which features a “combination” of traditional and modern cultures that dominate various sectors of society (politics dominated by the ‘modernized’ army and culture by traditionally educated), and relatedly the political instrumentality of deploying traditionalist discourse which explains attempts for its consolidation even by sectors of society that are supposed to have assimilated modern logic, i.e. the ruling military. Laroui’s scheme could be exemplified by the Egyptian president Anwar el-Sadat used to refer to himself as the “faithful president” and the “Egyptian family’s elder” while calling for the “opening up” of the Egyptian economy to Western capitalism, and modernizing education, etc. Laroui later came to view the Islamic Revival as a confirmation of his suspicions about the deep-rootedness of traditionalism in Arab society and thought. See 1995, *as-sunna wa al –islah, min diwan el siyasa*, etc.

logic, not as generated from one another or as accounting for each other's emergence. Laroui concludes that, according to the traditionalist understanding of history, events do not carry a "positive weight" in and of themselves: they neither shape what comes after them nor are formed by what comes before them; they only assume a value and meaning when "divine will becomes immanent in human life, as in the life of the prophet or in any other narrative that follows its structure," and lose that meaning in the eras of "absence" or "fall." In both cases, the observer-historian maintains a certain detachment from, and a resignation towards, the event at hand. This resignation serves to highlight how closely the event approximates or diverges from the ideal form of prophetic life before a correct judgment can be passed upon it (1973, 50-54).

By contrast, "historicism," the mode of historical writing associated with Western modernity per Laroui, perceives historical events as connected to each other in a "generative relationship" in which events have a consequential relationship (ibid). This relationship is mediated by a human will that is in its turn conditioned by historical context, and bounded by historical possibilities. Laroui thus conceives of human agency as historically specific. The human subject's ability to judge and act are always situated within a particular historical context that defines their possibilities and limits<sup>50</sup>.

According to this definition, historicism's subject is a responsible historical agent: neither an objective witness to divine will, nor the executor of the preconceived mission featured in traditionalism. Additionally, truth is always *becoming*; it is not accessible or achieved through the exercise of reason or interpretation of scripture. Rather, historicist "truth" could only be revealed by the workings of history, and is therefore not fixed but mutable and contextual. Accordingly, what appears as "truth" at a particular historical moment and within a specific historical context is never absolute or perennial, but a "truth" that is specific to a particular time and place, and therefore bound to change. Laroui highlights how historicism lies at the heart of democratic political practice and its contested and ever-changing conception of "political truth."

Democracy is a system of civic rule based on the assumption that no one owns the political truth (i.e., the route to attaining the happiness, well being and development of society). This truth is formed gradually through continuous deliberation, mutual persuasion, and, ultimately, the voting system, all of which are ways of providing a consensual truth momentarily conceded to [by members of society] until changing circumstances prove otherwise. (1973, 60).

In contrast to this context-specific notion "truth" and its deliberative political subject, traditionalism breeds a subject characterized by loyalty to a fixed "truth" represented in the "golden age" of Islamic history. Refusing to see this understanding of "truth" as itself a form of interpretation, Laroui considers the "traditionalist mentality" as one that exists "in the perpetual present...that divorces itself from its lived reality and lives in a time past, one which it considers an absolute truth" (1973, 31). This is precisely why Laroui refers to traditionalist subjectivity as ahistorical (ibid).

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<sup>50</sup> Laroui defines the "logic of historicism" as comprising four main aspects: the fixity of stages of historical progress, unity of direction of history (your past is our future), possibility of borrowing a culture (based on the essential unity of humankind), and the historical agency of intellectual and politicians (the possibility of effecting leap and compressing historical time/stages (1973, 186)).

The mutability of truth does not apply to the “imperativeness of historical stages” that Laroui posits as one of the premises of historicism. So to the extent does Laroui’s notion of “agency” tally with the “determinism” that historicism entails? Laroui addresses in a later work, *Concept of History*, where he explains the particular relationship of “determinism” and the historicist subject:

[The determinism of the historicist is not] a natural determinism [i.e., the relationship between phenomena in the natural world], but a voluntary one. This determinism signifies that a society has decided to enter the realm of history, and to persist in the direction [which historicism dictates]. Put more specifically, the rules of historicism become fixed insofar as the human is aware that he or she is a historical being. When this happens, history becomes identical to politics, and consciousness to will and initiative. Determinism in this case is a subjective law, not a fate imposed on the subject by an external force (1992, 360).

The subject of historicism is thus a subject whose entry into the historicist mode of consciousness happens through a conscious decision. But this decision only takes place when the subject becomes aware that he exists in “historical time,” i.e., a time defined by the imperativeness of particular historical stages for all human history (unity of history), and of the possibility of borrowing another people’s culture to effect a move through these stages (unity of humankind). In other words, Laroui’s historicist subject is one who needs to be made aware of his or her backwardness in relation to others who exist on the same “historical plane,” and to then recognize that only a movement along that same plane, in the same direction, and through the same means, could effect historical progress. Only when such a “decision” is made on the part of subjects aware of their “historical nature,” or their backwardness in relation to others, can history become the realm of political activity, the space where historical knowledge about patterns of social behavior informs daily political practice and determines the exercise of human will in favor of a particular goal<sup>51</sup>. The question that looms large from this exegesis is, of course, how can the (ahistorical Arab) subject be made aware of his historicity, a precondition for entering the age of historicism? As we shall see in the following section, Laroui reserves this awareness for the progressive intellectual—the agent to whom the reformation of Arab subjectivity is entrusted.

Laroui’s argument for historicism as the mode of historical and political consciousness that most befits the Arab condition seems to be justified on two grounds. First, he establishes that it has shaped *de facto* Arab reality since the time of colonialism. Accordingly, only a thorough assimilation of historicism could enable a proper and accurate understanding of the social, political and economic reality of the Arab condition. Alternatively, not attaining such an understanding comes at great costs in all these areas<sup>52</sup>. The second objective has to do with the potential benefits of adopting

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<sup>51</sup> Laroui suggests at this understanding of politics at the outset of his *Arabs and Historical Thinking* (17, 1973) and again in his *Concept of History* (360, 1992).

<sup>52</sup> Laroui illustrates the magnitude of this cost through setting the Arab-Israeli conflict as an example of the ahistorical logic of the Arab versus the historicist logic of the Jewish settler (1948-1967). While the former keeps arguing for a right to the land based on the “absolute truth” of continuous ownership of the land, the Jewish settler colonizes, populates, and toils the land in an organized and systematic manner, and by his actions creates a new reality. Laroui lauds Palestinian resistance movements for having understood that logic and for having begun to assimilate it in their actions in the late 60s-early 70s (1973, 60-63).

historicism, in terms of both understanding and achievement. Historicism, Laroui asserts, would enable political action based on an understanding of history as a process comprised of successive stages, the movement from one to the next conditioned upon the exercise of human will within the bounds of historical circumstance. The latter renders possible what Laroui terms “leaps,” i.e. the ability to compress historical time to include the fruits of a historical stage without fully passing through it<sup>53</sup>.

Though Laroui does not make the contrast explicit, the understanding of history featured in historicism departs from that of the cleric, the liberal, and the nationalist, all of whom equate Western modernity with a singular stage that they perceive as its originary core (Religious reformism, liberalism as a political system, and industry, respectively). In contrast, historicism offers a mode of consciousness that perceives history as a continuous and dialectical process, in which future (cultural, political, socioeconomic) forms both preserve and transcend present ones, and present forms contain the seeds of these future forms. This understanding of history is aimed at providing the Arab intellectual with a new and systematic way of conceiving Western modernity, particularly from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and of helping him understand the nature of the forces that colonize his society without rejecting modernity in its totality.

## V. Modernity as Specificity:

Laroui leaves us with conflicting impressions about what prospective Arab modernity might look like. In some instances, we get the sense that he champions an Arab future that resembles the Western (not too distant) past. We reach this conclusion when we read his definition of historicism featuring the “imperativeness of historical stages” as delineated by “the direction of [presumably Western] history,” and the possibility of “borrowing” a culture from “others” based on the presumed “unity of humankind” (1973, 187). This is also by far the most prevalent understanding of “modernity” that Laroui’s commentators offer<sup>54</sup>. At other times, we find Laroui making a more historically-informed argument about the inevitability of the unity of Arab and Western histories, as a result of the colonial incorporation of the non-West into the logic that animates Western history (historicism) inherent in the processes of colonialism and imperialism, a forced universality that Arabs would do well to accept in order to surmount. Or, as Robert Lee (1997) aptly puts it in his description of Laroui’s

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<sup>53</sup> Note here that the emphasis on the possibility of effecting “leaps” by “subjects of history” is meant by Laroui as a rejoinder to positivist (Western) social science which insists on the necessity of the non-West passing through all historical phases in exactly the same way that occurred in the history of Western Europe; and also to anti-liberal Arab progressives (Surrealists, anarchists, etc.) who insist on the possibility of avoiding liberalism altogether. Instead of both these understandings, Laroui offers the possibility of “transcending liberalism while integrating its historical benefits” though he never really details how such transcendence could be effected (1973, 7-15).

<sup>54</sup> See for instance how Abu Rabi’ approvingly quotes Abdallah Saaf as noting that in Laroui’s view, “Europe has become the center of universal history, the focus of historical progress, and the principal axis of modern civilization” (362). After which he comments “Laroui seems to toss authenticity and even specificity out of the window” (ibid). See also Robert Lee’s (1997) reference to Laroui’s historicism as a theory that “destroys difference” between the West and the Arab world (79).

historicism, “Laroui claims that the historicism of Marx permits the Arab to join the West by revolting against it” (78).

Far from being contradictory, I suggest that the apparent difference in Laroui’s formulations on this issue could be seen as attempts to shed light on different sides of the same issue to educate two different kinds of audiences. In the former case, Laroui is arguing with the progressive, who is already convinced by the broader argument about the rupture with the traditionalist worldview, but needs an alternative theory to animate his ideological and practical efforts for instituting modernity. In the latter case, Laroui’s presumed reader is the traditionalist, whom he seeks to convince of historicism based on the “utility” of adopting this mode of consciousness as the way to succeed and forge ahead given the composition of the contemporary world<sup>55</sup>. Pedagogical as they may be, both these readings only constitute parts of Laroui’s broader and more nuanced argument about Arab modernity.

I suggest that where Laroui seems clearest and most consistent about how he conceives Arab modernity is when he speaks about “specificity.” Laroui insists that the adoption of historicism as a modality for culture and politics would not imply the production of an Arab future identical to the Western past or present. True, Arab society would have to pass through, or integrate the fruits of, each of the stages through which the modern West has passed, but this identity of stages does not connote that the Western and Arab societies experience modernity in the same manner. Different subjects experience the historical processes of modernity in different ways, depending on their specific histories and, on indigenous cultures, and the way these are brought to bear on historical processes.

Laroui never really provides an adequate definition of “specificity,” but he juxtaposes it against the traditionalist’s “authenticity,” the former being “dynamic and advanced” while the latter is “stagnant and backward-looking” (1973, 24). Laroui does exemplify what that specificity might look like in the context of his discussion of carving a culture (in the sense of the aesthetic representation of human experience) that is both “national” and “universal” at the same time. As an example, Laroui depicts 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany and 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia assimilating the modern Western forms of aesthetic expression (theater, novels, dance, etc.), while at the same time endowing them with the specificity of their own historical experience, thereby broadening the scope of the experience of modernity and making it more encompassing of the human experience as whole.

More specifically, Laroui gives the example of German theater introducing “history” as a “dramatic tool” that determines the psychological makeup of its protagonists, and in doing so, expanding the depth and range of human experience that European theater could depict. (Prior to this, Laroui notes, French theater depended on

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<sup>55</sup> It is rather curious that Laroui chooses to persuade his traditionalist reader using a “utility” argument and not a normative one. To be sure, Laroui reckons that a normative argument would inevitably fail with the traditionalist who is convinced that s/he has “absolute truth” on his side. Yet, an argument devoid of principle seems to forgo the very basis upon which the traditionalist continues to choose traditionalism: its normative superiority to all other worldviews. In that sense, we could imagine the traditionalist espousing Laroui’s historicist argument in a “transitional” sense only. Such a transitional espousal would not constitute a transformation of subjectivity or mentality by any means, but just a shift of position that is ephemeral and momentary. Laroui’s writings about the role of the progressive in effecting subject transformation (see the following section) are by far more compelling in that regard.

the “traditional human motives” of greed, lust, ambition, etc. as the basis for its character composition.) Likewise, Laroui points out how Russian drama furthered the human impact of European theater by introducing the figure of “the peasant,” and Russian novelists invented a new temporality, “heavy time,” to describe the Russians’ experience of time as they compared their current void and lethargy to the imagined tempo of activity and productivity of Western Europe <sup>56</sup>.

Put together, these two examples indicate what Laroui means by “specificity” in the realm of cultural expression. He attempts to persuade Arab intellectuals to assume a “third direction” (which we can safely assume is what he terms “specificity” in the introduction of this volume) that deepens and perfects what Western culture had achieved, rather than insist on self-isolation and “folklorism.” This third position, as our author aptly portrays it, is based on the “rejection of two cultural traditions”:

The one dominates our contemporary world, claims universality and totality, and imposes itself upon us such that we are left with no choice but to comply or admit shortcoming; while the other is our inherited tradition, one that we once chose to express our condition, but that no longer captures the multiple dimensions of our psychological experience today. (1973, 84)

Instead of accepting the forms of expression offered by a hegemonic Western culture or an increasingly irrelevant Arab-Islamic heritage, Laroui calls for the adoption of “experiment and risk” that “attempts to deepen and expand the realm of Western culture and reveal that this alleged universality is in fact lacking. It lacks our experience, an experience that if we manage to properly crystallize, will assume a general significance [for all of humanity]” (85).

What Laroui presents us with is a conception of modernity that is deeply informed by the Western experience and discerns in it genuine prospects for human emancipation and wellbeing. But this conception also entails a critical distinction between the actual practices of Western hegemony and universalism and the “principles and dreams” of modern Western culture. Indeed, the distinction amounts to one between two Wests: the “real West” and the “West as a dream.” The former “seems to impose itself upon us as a homogenous, transcendental unit...[it] is the thick, opaque, and arrogant West that we fight and that fights us” (1995, 84). This is the West that not only enslaved and colonized the non-West, but also exploited its own people. But this West, the “apparent West,” should not be conflated with the other West, the West of the 16<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>56</sup> In a previous work, *CAI*, we see Laroui underlining the uniqueness of how cultures that perceive themselves as having had a long and distinct past experience the present. These cultures, Laroui tells us, “live in the shadow of a glorious past, and therefore experience the present as a time of continuous and miserable degeneration” (25). Arabs, like their Greek, Persian, and before them German and Russian counterparts, experience the present in a particular way that is bred by a perpetual comparison between a distinctive past and a present that lacks such distinction. This is one of the reasons why Laroui considers the study of culture (as opposed to economic or political analysis) as particularly significant for understanding the Arab predicament. This is also why he posits that Franz Fanon’s writings about the experience of colonized subjects do not capture the essence of the Arab experience, but bespeaks the very particular historical experience of the Antilles (among other cultures) that do not experience their present (and past) in the same way that Arabs do. Laroui’s contention inadvertently refutes Ibrahm abu Rabi’s critique (made in 2003!) that Laroui does not take seriously and build upon Fanon’s work. As far as Laroui is concerned, Fanon speaks to an experience of colonialism that is very different from the Arab’s.

with its sciences and arts, and the West which in the aftermath of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had become increasingly critical of itself and its actions, “the West which revokes the selfishness of economics and its monopolization of resources and calls for self-emancipation and self-reconciliation” (ibid). The “West as dream,” Laroui notes, is no less a stranger to the “apparent West” than the non-West is to it. This critical distinction between the West as exploiter and colonizer and the West as innovator, creator and critic is one that Laroui deems crucial in developing a formulation of Arab modernity that is aware of the variegated trajectory of its counterpart in the West, and that is therefore always critical about the kind of route it forges for itself. This is a route that should reject the West as oppressor and colonizer, and discern and embrace the “West as dream” and as critique. This appropriation will expand, deepen, perfect, and therefore transform the West and make it human and universal.

Once more, we greet the figure of the intellectual-as-savior in Laroui. The “crystallization of the third path” that Laroui calls for requires the labor of understanding the offerings of modern culture, and attaining a thorough comprehension of the Arab historical experience, to explore how “our reality is but a sedimentation of the traces of historical development in our surroundings, our psyches, and our minds” (1973, 85). For Laroui, only the Arab intellectual would be capable of performing this labor.

Now Laroui has arrived at two significant conclusions regarding the problem of continued Arab backwardness, each of which uses the critique of the Arab (cultural and political) subject as its platform. First, Laroui argues that the mode of knowing and understanding reality that is most entrenched in Arab subjectivity—traditionalism—does not bear the historical continuity with the “Arab-Islamic heritage” it alleges, but is in fact a response to colonialism through a “return to a past” now perceived as ideal and glorious. While this “return” represented the most intuitive response to the colonial crisis in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the historical proximity to the Arab-Islamic heritage represented by Ottoman rule, the argument for “return” proposed by contemporary *salafism* should be understood as an imposition of historical continuity between the Arab past and present where none exists, and as a desperate reaction to the continued degradation of the Arab condition. Through this argument, Laroui’s hopes to eliminate the appeal of *salafism* to the contemporary traditionalist, who attaches to it due to the continuity that *salafism* claims to have with Arab-Islamic history, and the “purity” it claims to sustain in the face of the contaminating effects of Western discourse.

Once convinced by this argument, Laroui’s traditionalist reader might conclude that, though discontinuous with the Islamic past, *salafism* per Laroui’s definition may provide a “modernized” rendition of “heritage” such that this heritage could be brought to bear on questions of contemporary import. Laroui’s second major move comes through implicitly subverting this claim. Traditionalism’s discontinuity with its alleged genealogy notwithstanding, Laroui argues that it something very crucial from that genealogy, namely, the way it understands history and reality. This is precisely what disqualifies it as an appropriate mode of grasping the logic according to which the modern world operates. Laroui hopes to have at least shaken the traditionalists’ faith in the utility of their convictions in today’s world, and to have presented them with a glimpse of an alternative. What Laroui has done in a microcosmic fashion through his writings is, I suggest, precisely what he hopes the Arab progressive intellectual will do in a more systematic, intense, and comprehensive way through “Arabizing Marxism.”



## VI. Transformation into “Modernity”: Intellectual Agency Falls Short?

Laroui’s sustained critique of traditionalism and his delineation of what an “Arab modernity” could look like present his agent, the progressive intellectual, with the formidable task of transforming Arab cultural and political subjectivity. At this point, one may doubt Laroui’s trust in the intellectual as an agent who, when armed solely by ideas, is capable of unraveling the complex of mental, psychic, and emotional experiences constituting traditionalism. I suggest that, though our author tries his best to make the case for the possibility of a subject transformation spearheaded by the intellectual, there is no transformative mechanism that matches the complexity and multi-facetedness of the Arab subject.

Laroui does not give us a definition of what constitutes a progressive intellectual, but he offers a few scattered ideas about the “critical consciousness” that such an intellectual should possess. Once more, we discern in his definitions of “critical consciousness” an attempt to educate and guide his reader to recognize its existence, and to cultivate it in him or herself. In his introduction to *CAI*, for instance, Laroui refers to “critical consciousness” as the ability of the scholar of culture in a Third World context to detach him/herself from the sociological conditions of the society in question, and to “embody a consciousness that is liberated from the weight of inherited works and that is ready to institute a new culture amidst a revolutionary society.”<sup>57</sup> Only through this mode of analysis can that scholar capture the very particular forms of expression that emerge in a dynamic society where cultural products do not map onto the socioeconomic reality in which they are produced, i.e. where neither a positivist nor an ethnographic analysis could explain the emergence of such works in the contexts in which they emerge (1995, 27).

In a much later work, we find Laroui expressing a similar thought, this time about one’s ability to theorize or to distance oneself from lived reality and reflect upon it, as a prerequisite to the “politicization” of a pre-political society. The ability to theorize is depicted as the capacity to engage in a dialogue featuring two sides of oneself: one “attached to antecedent relationships” and the other disembodied from these relationships and capable of reflecting upon them at a distance. The moment of theorization itself is one in which “this capacity to uproot oneself from all imposed and inherited influences is revealed to one” (2008, 63). This exercise in attaining distance from lived reality in order to better understand it is precisely what characterizes the critical consciousness of the progressive intellectual. What Laroui identifies is not the possibility of a disembodied subject who has the capacity to exercise rational reflection apart from his or her contextual milieu<sup>58</sup>. Rather, he refers to the necessity of attaining distance from one’s context as a prerequisite to the exercise of theorizing. In attaining this distance, one does not lose view of one’s context; rather, one uses this distance to discern the defining attributes and dilemmas of that context through exercising a momentary detachment

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<sup>57</sup> Note that at the time when Laroui writes these phrases, (late 1960s) Arab societies by and large, considered themselves “revolutionary.” Laroui’s later writings reflect what we can refer to as a “reformist” bend.

<sup>58</sup> In *From the Realm of Politics* (2009) Laroui displays his awareness of how situatedness (in history, class, culture, etc.) impacts the views that one holds of social and political reality in an anecdotal form. See p. 61-62.

(imagined or real) from one's situatedness in it<sup>59</sup>. However, Laroui's motions towards "critical consciousness" are too few and too ambiguous to be considered a definition of the progressive intellectual. The real potential for cultivating the critic remains in the example that Laroui himself sets for his audience.

Regardless of how the progressive could be brought into being, Laroui contends that this figure represents the most promising agent of cultural change in Arab society, mainly due to his or her cognition of the necessity of bringing about a rupture with traditionalism as a precondition for social and political change<sup>60</sup>. More specifically, Laroui directs his writings on the topic to the "Arab Marxist," after concluding that Marxism is the "best available school for learning historicism," and that it provides the most comprehensive and persuasive theory of history available at the time (1973, 31)<sup>61</sup>.

Laroui is aware that Arab Marxism has hitherto failed to present a real alternative to traditionalism, let alone to effect a cultural or political transformation to historicism. The genesis of that failure lies in what he terms the "insufficient Arabization of Marxism," including the dearth of solid Arab translations of Marxist texts, and the shortage of attempts to use Marxist theory as a way to illuminate, de-mystify, and explain paradoxical or as-yet-unexplained aspects of Arab history, culture, economy and society. Here, Laroui gives the example of "the establishment of the Abbasid State" as a historical mystery that Marxism could be used to explain, and of the persistence of the Bedouin poem as a cultural problematic that it could elucidate (1973, 135). This insufficient Arabization of Marxism has, in its turn, resulted in Arab Marxism remaining a "transcendental" ideology, operating on the level of abstractions and "universal historical laws," incapable of illustrating the relevance of such concepts or laws to Arab history in the present. More damning still, the theoretical rigidity of Arab Marxism has resulted in

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<sup>59</sup> Conceived this way, Laroui's notion of theorizing through self-distancing is reminiscent of the way Sheldon Wolin elaborates *theoria* as a process of journeying that "allows for an unqualified description of the 'best society', one that does not have to make concessions to practicality or contingency" (2003, 35).

<sup>60</sup> In *AHT*, Laroui gives a brief speculative account of how the Arab Marxist emerges in the context of Arab society. It runs as follows: the repeated failure to institute modern reforms in Arab society gives successive generations of intellectuals ample time to explore the reasons for failure and progress. In so doing, a few eventually arrive at the conclusion that what they had previously thought of as distinct features of the modern world that can be adapted separately (as assumption that they held due to the partial and eclectic nature of the liberal and the nationalist states in the Arab world) is not true. They come to realize that individualism, materialism, democracy, humanism, capitalism, science, etc. are all facets of the same culture held by a particular class that emerges due to particular historical reasons: the bourgeoisie. Through intensive readings, these intellectuals discern that some variation of the Marxist narrative lies at the heart of most Western social scientific writings (particularly those of the developing world). This is how the Arab (and more generally the Third World intellectual) discovers Marxism. He or she decides to adopt it because it gives an adequate response to the main concern that that intellectual holds: how to bourgeoisie a society that does not have a bourgeoisie? Marxism's contention about the possibility of separating bourgeois culture (and generalizing it) from the bourgeoisie as a class propels that intellectual towards Marxism as a theory in which his major question could at least "make some sense" (1973, 164).

<sup>61</sup> Laroui makes this contention in 1973, but keeps holding on to it in his later writings in the 1990s and 2000s. For more on this point see *The Concept of History* and *In the Realm of Politics*. Notably, Laroui critiques the liberal and, more vehemently, the nationalist for using Marxism as a way to give them a quick summary of modern history, and not as a way to think about, or theorize, history and change. This deployment of a reduced form of Marxism is understandable given the priority of "achievement" to "reflection" that pervades the postcolonial state, but it is also problematic because it does not entail a real understanding of the logic underlying the historical processes and stages that Marx lays out (1995, 13)

its serving as a *de facto* apology for any form of social or political organization, “as a stage through which Arab society must pass in its path towards modernity” (137). In so doing, Arab Marxists, like their Western liberal counterparts, rendered Arab society hostage to the “iron laws of history,” and deprived it of the possibility of agency or of effecting “historical leaps” (ibid)<sup>62</sup>.

The end result was that Arab Marxism remained an ideology and a theory that existed alongside traditionalism, without permeating it or puncturing any of its claims. If anything, Arab Marxism in its abstraction and boundedness to unbending historical laws represented the grim rival to a traditionalism “that promised distinction from the other, and revenge from an unjust fate” (1973, 137)<sup>63</sup>. Laroui critiques progressives who divorced themselves from theory and steeped themselves in “praxis” for yielding more grounds to traditionalism in the cultural field over which it now held monopoly after the withdrawal of progressives, thus enabling the subjectivity against which they were struggling. Importantly, Laroui’s critique of praxis should not be seen to be a condemnation of attempts to transform the materiality of the Arab socioeconomic condition. Rather, what Laroui is concerned with is that in the absence of a theoretically-informed modality of praxis, Arab Marxists’ attempts at instituting change end up causing little by way of material change, and having grave consequences for the cultural realm which, he adds “has been left in the hands of salafism for the past few decades”<sup>64</sup> (35). Whether a rigid theoretician or a practical progressive, the Arab Marxist in this account seems to have lost sight of his or her most fundamental mission: effecting a transformation of a traditionalist consciousness into a modern historicist one.

With these critiques in mind, Laroui attempts to persuade the Arab Marxist to adopt a historicist reading of Marxism as the one most befitting the condition of Arab society<sup>65</sup>. But this delineation of historicist Marxism does not really show its intended

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<sup>62</sup> Laroui critiques Marxists for being unself-conscious as to their rigid mode of theorization as in large part an attempt to counterbalance the “romanticism” of many Arab intellectual at the time (the belief in the hero, a non-historical conception of social change, etc.) (Opt. cit., 135).

<sup>63</sup> It worth noting that, besides his critique of the Marxism of Arab Marxists, Laroui also critiques the liberal and, more vehemently, the nationalist for using Marxism as a way to give them a quick summary of modern history, and not as a way to think about and theorize history and change. This deployment of a reduced form of Marxism is understandable given the priority of “achievement” to “reflection” that pervades the postcolonial state, but it is also problematic because it does not entail a real understanding of the logic underlying the historical processes and stages that Marx lays out. Importantly, Laroui’s elucidation of reductive Marxism as the basis of the understanding of history espoused by the liberal, the nationalist, and even the cleric, runs against the “anti-Marxist” rhetoric of Arab intellectuals and political leaders (1995, 13). This is another instance of de-mystification, albeit a more tacit one, that Laroui performs for his reader in *Contemporary Arab Ideology*.

<sup>64</sup> Laroui’s critique of praxis and his concern with “intellectual activity” had produced much by way of critiquing his “elitism,” a charge which Laroui himself takes stock of and revokes in his 1995 introduction to the Arabic translation of *Contemporary Arab Ideology*. One such critique of Laroui’s work is the one posed by Jabiri in a series of articles he published in critique of Laroui’s CAI and AHT (see Kurdi, B. 2000. *muhawarat fikr al-‘arawi: Conversations with Laroui’s Thought*, bayrut: al-markaz al-thaqafai al-‘arabi).

<sup>65</sup> Basically, Laroui argues for a reading of Marx that takes seriously the early Marx’s preoccupation with the question of German backwardness, “how can a non-industrialized and non-capitalist society progress in a world ruled by industrialized, capitalist states?” (1973, 161) and to read Marx in that light. This reading would render the “ideological” (early) Marx very important to the stage at which Arab society lies at the moment in question, i.e., the Marx who engages in critique of extant structures of thinking about reality

audience how to undertake the daunting task of transforming traditionalist subjects into historicist ones. Instead, this suggestion merely attempts to offer the progressive the “version” of Marxism most in line with the progressive’s presumed objective as Laroui sees it: how could the fruits of liberal capitalism be integrated into a society without that society having to (fully) pass through that historical stage? (1973, 7) The only place where we find a relatively cogent program for engaging in this mission is in Laroui’s proposition regarding “the Arabization of Marxism.” Laroui considers this embodiment of Marxism in Arab history and society through an expansive research agenda as a prerequisite for two essential processes: the popularization of the concepts of historicism, liberalism, utilitarianism, etc. in Arab society, and the production of an ideology (understood as a set of goals to be sought in a backward society) that is “organically harmonious” with its context, in which “Arab society could discern a comprehensive and convincing understanding of its history, its present ambitions” (140). Put slightly differently, what Laroui suggests as crucial is the localization and naturalization of Marxism in the Arab setting, such that it becomes the most common, indeed the most intuitive, way through which the Arab subject comes to understand his or her past, present, and future<sup>66</sup>. Only through an engagement in this long-term project could the progressive hope to persuade the Arab public and political leadership of the relevance and applicability of historicism.

Ultimately, what we find in Laroui’s discussion of the “Arabization of Marxism” is a proposal that purports to operate on the targets of “reason,” “psyche,” and “unreason (emotion and dogmatic conviction)” through rational persuasion alone (176). After presenting us with an elaborate account of an intellectual-subject formed through successive and historically-specific reinventions of “tradition” that permeate every aspect of experience, Laroui contends that he is transformable simply through a process of intense intellectual activity operating on the level of rational argumentation or aesthetic representation. In this sense, Laroui’s discussion of the problem of Arab subjectivity is not matched, either in length or in sophistication, by an argument about how such a problem could be addressed. This absence or insufficiency is one that we shall see repeated in Hanafi and Jabiri.

To be sure, the complexity of the situation is not entirely lost on Laroui, whose persistence in writing about these themes well into the 2000s marks their continued if not heightened intractability. However, he qualifies his claims with only a few remarks that suggest he still believes that intellectual success hinges on the ‘historical opportunity’ represented by the erection of the nation-state in the 1950s-1960s, and its consolidation in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Writing at this time, Laroui tells us that the contemporary

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(German Ideology) and tries to uncover their underlying assumptions before undoing them. The later Marx, the Marx of Capital, should then be read in light of how Marx himself remained engaged with the question of German backwardness, and what positions he took on the political happenings of his time. This is the understanding of Marx that Laroui posits as both intuitive and necessary for the Arab Marxist—it is intuitive in that it focuses on the concerns that animate that intellectual (relative backwardness, how to integrate the results of the liberal capitalist stage without having to go through it, how to effect subjective leaps, etc.), and necessary because it outlines a program for the Arab intellectual for the steps to engage. This is juxtaposed to the way Western Marxists read Marx, which they variously term “scientific, liberal, economic, objective, etc.” (ibid).

<sup>66</sup> This particular concern with the inability of Arab Marxists (and liberals) to “nationalize” Western theories is a preoccupation that we shall later discern in the writings of Hanafi and Jabiri.

context is marked by the “increased, and almost perfect, interconnectedness of Arab and Western societies” compared to colonial and semicolonial times (1995, 137). Though he does not explain specifically what that means, it likely refers to the rapid industrialization of Arab society in postcolonial times and how it results in the increasing “social differentiation” of Arab society into classes and sectors that more closely map onto their counterparts in the West. In turn, this differentiation enables a larger number of that society’s constituents to have access (in terms of exposure to Western methods, but also in terms of their intelligibility) to a more systematic understanding of Western culture and society. Ultimately, we could deduce that the nature of this “historical moment,” which Laroui seems to consider too intuitive to elaborate, provides the opportunity for transformative intellectual activity. In a sense, Laroui seems to designate “history” as an agent which, when aided by the will and activity of the intellectual, could be entrusted with effecting the desired transformation of the Arab subject. The problem with this formulation, however, is that Laroui’s own theorization of historicism, as previously discussed, stipulates that the very entry into the realm of history requires a “conscious decision” taken by a society whose constituents are aware of their “historical nature” (1992, 360). Once again, we return to the transformation of the subject as the fundamental problematic upon which all else, including the activation of the agency of history, is based.

For Laroui, the success of transformative intellectual activity seems to rely on historical opportunity, and also on the psychological dissonance produced by the contradiction between the “logic of modernity” (featured in the increasing deployment of modern technology in Arab society and economy), and the logic of traditionalism (which underlines the way the Arab subject experiences the world). To add to the intellectual’s burden, however, we can infer from Laroui’s text that this dissonance, though very real, is neither apparent nor experienced as an inconsistency by the majority of Arab society. It needs to be exposed, analyzed, and underlined by the Arab intellectual. Once this is done, Laroui seems to expect this revelation of inconsistency between the Arab subject’s lived reality and his mode of understanding the world to resonate with his Arab reader. This is what we see Laroui performing when he tells us at the beginning of *AHT* that, “ever since the Arab Renaissance our bodies have been living in one century while our thoughts and feelings inhabit another” (24), or when he discusses the implications of this inconsistency in issues of historical import to Arab states (and peoples) like the Arab-Israeli conflict. By probing the dissonance between “Arab reality” and Arab subjectivity, indeed by marking the dissonance *as* a disjuncture, Laroui tries to generate a certain level of discomfort on the part of his audience that could catalyze the transformative mission of the intellectual<sup>67</sup> (81).

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<sup>67</sup> Another instance where we see Laroui mobilizing that inconsistency between “Arab reality” of the Arab subject and the way he or she conceives of or feels about that experience is in *mafhum al-‘aql*, or *The Concept of Reason*. Here, Laroui (1996) provides his reader with what he calls: “Mohamed ‘abduh’s paradox.” This paradox consists in the contradiction that the Arab experiences on a daily basis between the perceived “rationality” of Islam, and the raging “irrationality” of Muslim countries. ‘Abduh tried to resolve the paradox by contending that this “irrationality” is owed to the absence of “true Islam” from Muslim society, as we have previously seen with the cleric, and as we continue to see with the discourse of reformist Islam (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood) in contemporary political discourse. Laroui “exploits” this lived paradox to argue that its resolution lies not with an appeal to a “true Islam” that “has never been

However, Laroui's development of a transformative strategy may be considered insufficient at best in light of his narrative about the persistence of traditionalism and eclecticism. Indeed, what is most persuasive in Laroui's transformative project is precisely what remains unsaid: namely, his identification of traditionalism and eclecticism as primarily *historical* rather than essential attributes of Arab cultural and political subjectivity. This is illustrated by Laroui's delineation of "modern" responses to the historically-specific challenges posed by the conditions of colonialism, post-colonialism, and global capitalism (imperialism)—ranging from the "frustration, despair, and nostalgia" that animate the cleric's quest to the "demand for rapid industrialization without forgoing authenticity" that underlines the nationalist's efforts. By highlighting the historical, and therefore ephemeral, nature of these modalities, Laroui in fact loosens the grip of these discourses on his reader's understanding of reality, diluting the timelessness of their claims, and casting their premises into doubt. In other words, the real transformative potential of Laroui's project lies not in his formulation of modernity or in his outlining of Arab Marxism as its primary vehicle; rather, this potential lies in his critique of Arab subjectivity, and in the way he performs that critique.

### **Conclusion:**

This chapter argues that Laroui's project should be understood as political theoretical in at least three registers. First, Laroui's examination of Arab ideology entails a critique of the modes of understanding and engaging with the political world that have come to pervade Arab society since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Second, Laroui offers a conception of modernity that is meant to provide a theoretical edifice for Arab intellectuals' "praxis," their attempts to transform the material and political condition of Arab society. Third, Laroui deploys a variety of rhetorical tools (impersonation, dissonance, pragmatic argumentation) through which he attempts to subvert dominant understandings of history and to inculcate new ones in his Arab reader.

In his critique of Arab ideology, Laroui produces a diagnosis of the malady of the Arab condition as consisting in the traditionalist mode of understanding history. This mode conceives of history as a realm driven by divine will, and where human agency consists in bearing witness to history's unfolding, and aspiring to a "return" to the historical "pattern" represented by the early Islamic period. Projected onto the realm of modern Arab ideology, this mode of understanding history manifests itself in the cleric's conception of the text/past as the "source" to which the colonized Arab subject should "return" should he wish to overcome his "backward" condition. This return, Laroui argues, does not produce an "authentic" reading of the Islamic historical past, or a "correct" interpretation of the Islamic text(s). Rather, it constitutes a projection of the cleric's experience of (colonial) modernity and an attempt to grapple with the modern challenges to a religious "mode of consciousness" that does not comport with modernity's thrust.

However, Laroui's depiction of the cleric, and of traditionalism's manifestations in modern Arab ideology more generally, is inconsistent. On the one hand, Laroui's presents traditionalism as a mode of conceiving history that curtails human agency

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embodied anywhere," but in the non-identity between the concept of "reason" of Islamic theology and that of Western modernity (23-72).

because it understands historical change as divinely mediated, and events as disparate happenings bearing no necessary relationship to one other (1973, 45). For traditionalism, history is a realm that deifies human intelligibility, let alone intervention. On the other, Laroui's discussion of the cleric and the nationalist, the two representatives of traditionalism in contemporary Arab ideology, presents them as possessing the self-understanding of an agentive subject, acutely attuned to the problem of his context, and active in seeking and enacting solutions for these problems. Such, for instance, is Laroui's portrayal of the cleric's reinterpretation of Islamic sources as advocating "freedom" and "reason" instead of oppression and irrationality, and his consistent attempts at repudiating Western claims to the contrary. Such also is Laroui's understanding of nationalism as a ruling creed that seeks to enact a new mode of subjectivity in its "citizens" (1995, 767). Far from being resigned to the workings of divine predestination or reconciled to their current condition, the picture that Laroui paints of these two figures is one of a subject attentive to, engaged with, and intent on producing "positive" historical change in his surroundings. Regardless the verity of their mode of historical understanding, the subject of Arab ideology as Laroui conceives him is not the apathetic subject of traditionalism.

Laroui's critique of traditionalism is also "ideological," in the sense that it configures traditionalism in a way that enables it to be subverted by historicism. Laroui's critique of traditionalism as offering an "inauthentic" conception of history should be understood in the context of Laroui's choice of "Marxist historicism" as the mode of consciousness best befitting Arab society (and the Third World more generally). Laroui's portrayal of the cleric's interpretation of Islamic history as "inauthentic" in the sense of being produced by salafism's projection of modern Western ideals on the Islamic corpus rather than by an accurate recovery of the genuine "historical" meanings of the text. The cleric's understanding of Islamic history is, for Laroui, itself constituted by the modern (colonial) condition in which he is embedded. Underlying Laroui's conception of the inauthenticity and incorrectness (in the sense of being ideologically motivated) of the cleric's reading of history is a belief that there *exists* an alternative conception of that history that is both, more accurate as well as better able to address the problems of the modern condition. For Laroui, this alternative modality of historical understanding is Marxist historicism, the conception of history as a set of stages, and of the movement from one stage to the next as caused by human agency. To be sure, Laroui presents this mode of conceiving history to be as much an "ideology" as traditionalism, that is to say, he understands it to represent one among many other possible ways of conceiving reality whose merit derives from its ability to better tackle the modern condition. Despite this "pragmatic" twist in Laroui's argument, the general thrust of his argument for historicism, particularly that of Arabizing Marxism through using it to render Arab-Islamic history and resolve its paradoxes, conveys an underlying belief that historicism could indeed produce a 'better' and more historically 'accurate' understanding of the Arab-Islamic past, not to mention its present, compared to its traditionalist counterpart. In so doing, Laroui makes an ahistorical judgment about the superiority of traditionalism, one that does not regard itself as equally animated and produced by its postcolonial condition as traditionalism. This understanding that there is another, and better, way of understanding and living history is one that we shall continue to see in the respective projects of Hanafi and Jabiri.

### **Chapter III:**

## **Formed and Transformed by *Turath*: The Political Subject in Hassan Hanafi's *Heritage and Renewal***

### **Introduction:**

In an entry about the Egyptian Philosopher Hassan Hanafi in his book *The Politics of the Sacred and the Secular*, Shahrough Akhavi (2009) comments that Hanafi “must have read Laroui,” which indeed he had done.<sup>68</sup> We see Laroui’s influence not only in Hanafi’s preoccupation with history as the sphere in which human thought and action should be interpreted and initiated, but in his choice of the locus of the “Arab crisis,” which for both thinkers lies in the constitution of the Arab subject. But whereas Laroui and his generation of Arab intellectuals, writing in the immediate aftermath of the Six Days War, could only envision the transformation of Arab subjectivity through a “rupture” or *qati’a* with the Arab-Islamic heritage, Hanafi, writing in the polarized political milieu of the 1980s and the 1990s, holds a significantly different view about how to address the problem of the Arab subject<sup>69</sup>.

Hanafi’s works convey a preoccupation with the failure of Arab nationalist attempts to institute genuine national independence, and an attunement to the rise in the intellectual and political currency of Islamist ideologies. Hanafi recognizes that any attempt to transform the Arab condition had to commit to an Islamic referentiality in order to resonate with broader society. Yet, having digested the radical critique of post-1967 Arab intellectuals, Hanafi also recognizes that this referentiality had had a problematic effect on contemporary Arab subjectivity. To bridge these two concerns and the ideological poles they represent, Hanafi addresses the impact of the Arab-Islamic heritage—which for Hanafi consists in the corpus of the historical Islamic disciplines of theology, scriptural exegesis, jurisprudence, legal theory, philosophy, and mysticism—has on modern Arab society on the formation of the Arab subject before mobilizing that heritage to reconstitute that subject<sup>70</sup>.

Despite its deeply political bent, Hanafi’s *oeuvre*, like Laroui’s, is still seldom discussed in terms of political theory (or discussed at all, for that matter, in the English-speaking world). The fact that the vast majority of Hanafi’s works are only published in Arabic partially explains this inattention. John Esposito and John Voll (2001) provide a

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<sup>68</sup> In a footnote in *Heritage and Renewal, Our Attitude Towards the Ancient Heritage*, Hanafi ([1980] 1992) mentions that he had written a commentary on Laroui’s thought under the title “Arabs and Historical Thinking” (note that this is the same title of the book that Laroui published in 1973), but that the manuscript of this essay had been lost prior to its publication (27).

<sup>69</sup> I use the “Arab subject” to refer to Hanafi, Jabiri, and Laroui’s understanding of the Arab as the “human being who is shaped by Arab culture” (Jabiri, 1984, 40), where “Arab culture” refers to the corpus of historical works that comprise the Arab-Islamic heritage, as well as to the common linguistic and historical experience (colonialism, decolonization struggles, the Arab nationalism project) of the geographical and linguistic region usually referred to as the “Arab world.” For more on the discussion of the usage of “Arab subject” in this study, refer to the introduction, pp. 1-30.

<sup>70</sup> I shall be using the male pronoun to refer to the subject in Hanafi’s analysis, since Hanafi makes no reference to the female subject in his analysis, and consistently uses the male pronoun to identify his referent. More generally, though Hanafi’s analysis is concerned with an abstract “Arab consciousness,” one can assume from the thrust of his works that the subject he has in mind is the Arab male.



“life and works” type of exposition by introducing Hanafi to a Western audience in *Makers of Contemporary Islam*. Shahrough Akhavi (2009) provides a brief discussion of Hanafi’s work in his *Politics of the Sacred and the Secular*, and presents a more engaged discussion of his 1997 renewal of Islamic theology. Armando Salvatore (1995:1997) also engages Hanafi in the broader context of examining contemporary mobilizations of the Arab-Islamic heritage. Valuable as these discussions are, they do not provide a sustained engagement with Hanafi’s corpus as whole, or an explication of the political thrust underlying his project. Carool Kersten’s (2011) engagement with Hanafi is by far the most comprehensive, but it is more concerned with elucidating the intellectual influences on Hanafi’s thought than offering an interpretation of his social or political theory.

To redress this lacuna, what I offer in this chapter is an account of Hanafi’s thought as an interrogation of the understandings of authority, legitimacy, liberty, and self-rule that have dominated contemporary Arab political discourse, and their genesis in the constitution of “Arab consciousness.” Additionally, I show how Hanafi subverts these understandings by reconstructing the inherited sources upon which they were initially based. To do so, I analyze how Hanafi deploys the concepts of “*turath*” or the Arab Islamic heritage to critique Arab ideology and to position his intervention vis-à-vis his Islamist and secular interlocutors. I then examine Hanafi’s account of the impact of *turath* on the contemporary Arab subject, analyze its implications for Arab political subjectivity, and evaluate its repercussions for Hanafi’s conception of the agency of that subject. Finally, I reconstruct Hanafi’s renewal of the *turath* to explicate how it addresses the maladies of Arab subjectivity as he sees them, and to assess whether this renewal is an effective remedy. In short, I provide a three-pronged critical exposition of the political-theoretical thrust of Hanafi’s intervention: as a critique of ideology, as a critique of the Arab subject, and as a program for the transformation of that subject. First, however, it is important to examine Hanafi’s identification of the locus of the Arab crisis in the Arab subject.

### **The Arab Crisis as a Problem of Arab Subjectivity:**

For Hanafi as for Laroui, the complex of social, economic, and political problems faced by postcolonial Arab states finds its roots in the historical composition of the “consciousness” of the Arab subject. Unlike Laroui, however, Hanafi specifies what he perceives as the major problems with the Arab condition. In his delineation of these challenges, Hanafi identifies the Arab-Islamic heritage, or *al-turath*, as the realm from which the maladies of the Arab condition emanate and in which their potential resolution resides.

Where Laroui deployed “historical backwardness” as an intuitive shorthand for the experience of “daily suffering” of the Arab subject (especially the intellectual) (1973, 149), Hanafi speaks of a broader “Arab-Islamic crisis,” manifested in six distinct problems: 1) the continued occupation of Muslim lands; the absence of “liberties” (which Hanafi explains as the persistence of authoritarian rule and the violation of liberties through legal and violent means); 2) the lack of social and economic justice; 3) the continued fragmentation of Arab lands and peoples despite their unity, “historically, geographically, culturally, and nationally” (26); 4) the continuous threat that “westernization” poses to Arab identity; 5) the continued “retardation” or *takhalluf* of

Arab societies (which Hanafi defines through “lack of social services, overpopulation, food shortages, housing and energy problems, budget deficits and foreign debt,” etc. (27); and 6) finally, the enduring apathy of the masses, who remain “quantity without quality, numbers without power” (ibid).<sup>71</sup>

In explaining each of these crisis areas, Hanafi marks “the Arab-Islamic heritage” or *turath* as the domain in which the problems of liberty and underdevelopment in Arab societies should be understood and resolved, and “consciousness” the locus in which the influence of that “heritage” should be analyzed. Hanafi implies that due to the formative influence that *turath* has on modern Arab society, the reason for that society’s stagnation should be fetched in *turath* itself. Additionally, since “Arab consciousness” represents the place where *turath* is held, the analyst’s attention should be directed towards that consciousness. In that vein, after mentioning the problem of the violation of liberties, Hanafi poses the rhetorical question: “what are the historical roots of the crisis of liberty and democracy in our contemporary consciousness? And could the negation in the declaration that ‘there is no God but the one God’ be made to play the role of opposition to authoritarianism and oppression?” (Ibid) Likewise Hanafi inquires whether the reason for the persistence of underdevelopment lies “merely in the insufficiency of expertise, capital, and adequate planning,” or whether it grew from a deeper problem than that, namely “one of our conception of the world, in our ability to impact it, and in our sense of history” (ibid). Similarly, in elaborating on public apathy, Hanafi comments: “if but one Westerner was a victim of violence, the whole world declares its concern, and when entire [Arab or Muslim] nations are destroyed no one moves. All the while we keep reciting [from the Qur’an] ‘and how many times have the few triumphed over the many by the will of God’” (ibid).

In all these examples, Hanafi mobilizes a historical framework to address a contemporary problem. He construes the problems of liberty as having “historical roots” in Arab “consciousness” and whose resolution may reside in the reconstruction of the meaning of the monotheism. He likewise locates the genesis of Arab apathy in the sense of fatalism generated by reciting Qur’anic verses about patience and the prospective triumph of the few. In his *Heritage and Renewal* project, Hanafi further elaborates on his identification of the “Arab-Islamic heritage” as the place where the problems of Arab subjectivity should be sought and the resource through which they could be solved.

### **I. *Turath* as Critique of Arab Ideology:**

Hanafi’s introduction to the *Heritage and Renewal* project, which he usually refers to as the “manifesto,” performs two interrelated objectives: it claims the continued influence of the Arab-Islamic heritage on conceptions of social and political reality, and presents it as a major cause of the contemporary “Arab crisis.” To make these claims,

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<sup>71</sup> Hanafi reiterates this characterization of the “Arab crisis” in almost all his publications in the 1980s and the 1990s. See for instance the way he uses it to foreground his examination of Islamic theology in *min al’aqida ila al-thawra (From Doctrine to Revolution)*:

The masses are faithful, *mo’mena*, heritage-infused, *turathiyya*, but they are also in a condition of occupation, oppression, poverty, disunification, retardation, alienation and apathy. Various methods of social change, using the new, the old, and blends of the new and the old have been tried to remedy this situation. The result, however, was the formation of self-enclosed and angry Islamic groups, and of self-enclosed secular secret societies” (1988, v.1, 70).

Hanafi redefines *turath* as a component of the Arab present as much as of its past and “consciousness” as the kernel within which this component is preserved and reinterpreted. While Hanafi tells us that these redefinitions are meant to set the theoretical framework for his subsequent investigation of *turath*, a close reading of his work suggests that he also uses them to critique contemporary Arab ideology and to carve a distinct space for his own political theoretical intervention.

In the true spirit of a manifesto, Hanafi ([1980] 1992) begins *Heritage and Renewal, Our Attitude Towards the Ancient Heritage* with a dramatic set of assertions about how *turath*, as embodied in the hegemonic positions within the Islamic disciplines, has come to produce a set of attitudes and behaviors that are still widely observable in contemporary Arab society. In doing so, he attacks *salafism*'s idolization of the early Islamic theologians (the *salaf*) by claiming that their formulations created a submissive, and ahistorical subject. In this context, Hanafi offers the following striking claim about how the historical discipline of Islamic theology or *'ilm usul al-din* have come to influence present-day attitudes of Arab individuals towards politics and society:

We still moan under the fatalism we inherited from the *salaf*, and explain our failures by positing, “caution never prevents fate.” We exhaust our minds personifying the divine, finding in this a consolation for our unawareness of our present condition, its origin and its future. We submit our reason to the text... and sever the relationship between our reasoning capacity and the analysis of our immediate reality, forgetting that that reality was the original source of the [revealed] text. We accept our leaders by appointment, and obey them submissively because of weakness or fear, then find in *turath* what justifies this situation. We rob nature of its independence and its laws, regard it as the source of evil and doom, and charge all naturalist inclinations [within *turath*] with materialism and atheism... all this is part of the psychological legacy (*al mawrouth al-nafsy*) of Islamic theology ([1980] 1992, 16).

Though Hanafi's attack on the *salafi* position seemingly resembles that of Arab seculars like Laroui, it should in fact be read as a critique of the secular view of the relationship between historical text and contemporary context. In positing, “reality was the original source of the [revealed] text,” Hanafi hints at the “proper” relationship between any text, including revelation, and its historical context. This relationship, as I elaborate later<sup>72</sup>, features a dynamic interaction between the text and its human interpreter such that textual meanings are continuously brought to bear on the historical condition of its reader. For our purposes here, it is important to note how this hint is directed squarely at the “secular” position which, Hanafi tells us later, asserts the impropriety of bringing historical texts to bear on a contemporary condition that is guided by a different set of variables.

What we see here, in other words, is Hanafi's figuration of *turath* as a live presence in contemporary reality to position himself on a continuum between two extreme positions: the *salafi* claim that overcoming the problems of the Arab condition could only occur “through returning to the [ways of the] past” (27)<sup>73</sup>, and the “secular”

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<sup>72</sup> I explain Hanafi's theorization of the “proper” relationship between revelation and reality in the section titled “Turath as a Problem,” p. 27.

<sup>73</sup> It should be noted that this reductive reading of the *salafi* position has been duly criticized by several works on the *salafi* movement that illustrate its diversity and its interpretive agility. For an account of this

claim that *turath* is no longer suited to the needs of the present and therefore that a rupture with it is the only way forward (29). The former valorizes “the past” when that past had given rise a problematic present, and the latter ignores the possibilities that human interpretive capacities could bring to historical texts. By contrast, Hanafi posits his own conception of *turath* as a body of inherited texts that should be continuously interpreted in accordance with the needs of the present, a position he envisions as abiding by the Islamic tradition and its sources (and thus as not secular) without necessarily being bounded by a traditionalist hermeneutics (and therefore as not *salafi*).

Indeed, the imperative to reinterpret *turath* is presented by Hanafi as essential to any realistic and responsible reform attempt in Arab society. In that vein, Hanafi begins his “manifesto” by asserting the value of *turath* for maintaining historical continuity, achieving authenticity, and providing a workable program for social change. In other words, Hanafi mobilizes *turath* to make an intervention about three of the most significant –and contested– questions in contemporary Arab ideology. At the outset of the manifesto, Hanafi tells us,

The issue is not merely one of “renewing *turath*” because the beginning lies not in renewal, but in *turath* itself; this is in order to preserve the continuity of national culture, to find the roots of the present in the past (*ta’sil al hader*), to push it towards progress, and to participate in the efforts towards social change. Taking *turath* as our starting point is therefore a cultural and national responsibility, and the renewal (*tajdid*) of this *turath* is its reinterpretation in accordance with the needs of the present. This is because the old precedes the new and authenticity comprises the bases for contemporaneity... *Turath* is not of value in itself except insofar as it provides a theory for interpreting and changing the present. It is not a museum of ideas which we hold in pride and awe; it is a theory of action, a director of behavior, and a resource that could be exploited and invested in rebuilding the human and his relationship to the land, the two stumbling blocks against which all efforts of developing countries fail (13).

Hanafi here makes a claim about the normative superiority of maintaining historical continuity with national culture as the best way to achieve “authenticity.” The kind of argument Hanafi is making here is not about the need for “an historical analysis of the present in light of the past,” as we have seen him do earlier. Rather, it is an argument about the inherent value of maintaining such a continuity which, he later comments, maintains the subject’s “homogeneity in time” (20) or renders the different parts of his history comprehensible and meaningful. Indeed, the term that Hanafi uses in this context, *ta’sil*, carries the dual connotation of “finding the roots of” and “authenticating,” whereby rendering a (theoretical or ideological) position authentic could be understood as exploring the roots of that position in the subject’s collective past.

In light of the value-ladenness of the term *asala* or “authenticity” in contemporary Arab discourse and its association with “Islamist” arguments on reforming the Arab condition, Hanafi’s deployment of this term should be read as an unequivocal declaration of his rejection of the “secular” position that, in his estimate, calls for foregoing

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position, For an account of this position, refer to Roel Meijer, 2009. *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press, and Charles Hirschkind, 2001. “Tradition, Myth, and Historical Fact in Contemporary Islam,” *ISIM Newsletter*, 08/01, 18.

authenticity for the sake of “contemporaneity or *mu’asara*.<sup>74</sup>” But the argument for “authenticity,” Hanafi adds a few sentences later, is not only normative; it also represents a view that adheres to the logical sequence of phenomena, since the “old precedes the new, and authenticity is the basis for contemporaneity” (13). This logical precedence of the old to the new, or of the Arab-Islamic history and its legacy to the present Arab condition, is why Hanafi ultimately implies that the logical way to go about achieving “progress and social change” or “contemporaneity” is to mobilize the past to change the present. The manner of achieving such “mobilization,” however, is what distinguishes Hanafi’s position from salafism.

Attaining “continuity with national culture” is, Hanafi implies, an objective to be achieved and not a reality to be taken for granted. The achievement of this objective hinges on the ability of present-day Arab subjects to renew *turath*, or to “[reinterpret] it in accordance with the needs of the present” (ibid). The various sources and disciplines of *turath* as they stand at the moment are of no “value in [themselves]” until they can be rendered of use to the present as a “theory of action, a director of behavior, and a resource that could be invested to rebuild the human and his relationship to the land” (ibid). Hanafi’s formulation of *turath* as not valuable in and of itself contradicts the *salafi* position he implicitly caricatures as one that regards *turath* as “a museum of ideas to be held in pride and awe” (ibid). Indeed, Hanafi’s placement of the contention that “authenticity comprises the bases for contemporaneity” immediately after his claim about the necessity of renewing *turath* connotes that rendering *turath* authentic necessarily implies submitting it to continuous interpretation according to the needs of the present.

Though Hanafi does not clarify the connection between authenticity and renewal in this context, the connection becomes clear when we recall the proper relationship between text and context that he hints at in the earlier passage. There, Hanafi posited that “reality” was the original source of the revealed text, by which he meant that revealed texts historically came in response to worldly needs and were altered to address the changes in those needs. The “authentic” stance is thus one that aspires to a relationship between text and historical context paralleling the original and proper one that was willed by God. Thus, Hanafi’s understanding of authenticity rivals that of the seculars and the *salafis*, both of whom understand it as an idolization of *turath* that conceives of progress as a return to the edicts prescribed by a particular historical body of thought, an idolization that the seculars shun and the *salafis* embrace<sup>75</sup>.

Hanafi’s formulation contrasts with Laroui’s understanding of “authenticity” as the “static” consideration of the historical body of ideas and practices of *turath* as the ultimate truth. Laroui’s anxiety about adopting “authenticity” would have probably been allayed by Hanafi’s reformulation of the term to entail the dynamic interaction between historical texts and current contexts. One should note, however, that Hanafi’s insistence on the existence of a “national culture” whose “continuity” should be maintained by sustaining a relationship with inherited ideas and practices itself presents a reified formulation of “culture” that Laroui would, in all probability, have been critical of. Hanafi does indeed insist on the necessity of continuously interpreting *turath* to meet the

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<sup>74</sup> For a detailed account on the Arab intellectual debate on authenticity, see Issa Boullata’s. 1990. *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*. New York: SUNY series in Middle Eastern Studies.

<sup>75</sup> Hanafi’s particular usage of *salafism*, like that of Laroui and Jabiri, refers to all ideologies that claim that an affinity to (a particular conception of) the Arab-Islamic heritage marks the route to progress.

needs of the present, and the logical extrapolation of this position would posit that “national culture” is an entity always-in-formation in accordance with the results of human interpretative activity. Instead, Hanafi’s formulation casts “national culture” as an inert ontological entity to which interpretation has to relate itself to establish its legitimacy. This formulation departs from Laroui’s understanding of the construction of “national culture” as the dynamic attempt of different peoples to interact with and transform the hegemonic (western) cultural modality through the introduction of “specific” local experiences. Their differences aside, Hanafi’s “authenticity” and Laroui’s “specificity” both point to these authors’ attunement to the historical character of *turath*, a historicity which both use to unsettle ideological claims about *turath*’s timeless relevance.

In that vein, Hanafi’s contention about the continuous need for reinterpreting *turath* should also be read as an assertion about its inherently historical character, or, as Hanafi later puts it, as “the realizations (*tahaquqat*) of theory in a particular circumstance, in a specific historical context, by a particular group for which these theories then form their vision and conception of the world” (15). This understanding of *turath* as a product of a particular historical context lies at the heart of Hanafi’s argument about the necessity of *turath*’s “renewal” in accordance with the “spirit of the times” (22). It is also the reason why Hanafi perceives his position as antithetical to any formulation about the ahistorical valuation of *turath*.

Like Laroui, Hanafi understands salafism’s ahistorical conception of *turath* to be itself a historically specific response to the Arab condition. For him, this view “projects the deficiencies of the present on the past to compensate for our generation’s own deficiency through escaping to a [now glorified] past” (27). The impulse to “return to the past” is not only conceived by Hanafi as an escape mechanism for beleaguered postcolonial intellectuals, it also marks an attempt by the traditional (religious) elite to maintain their privileges and reassert their political legitimacy in postcolonial times. The historical specificity of salafism’s impulse to glorify the past is further evidenced by its emulation of the “nationalist” modality of constructing a common imagined past for a particular group of people. “The tendency to valorize the past,” Hanafi contends, “represents a submission to the dictates of the nationalistic impulse which had spilled over to us from Western civilization” (28). On that account, salafism uses an essentially modern mechanism, the cultivation of a “nationalist impulse,” to conceive *turath* as refuge from a problematic present.<sup>76</sup> To be sure, Hanafi does not take this critique of salafism so far as to posit its “inauthenticity,” as Laroui does. For both authors, however, salafism’s position towards *turath* is construed as the response of religious leadership and nationalist elites to Western hegemony and the sociopolitical maladies of the Arab postcolonial state. They consider the *salafi* interpretation of *turath* as a historically specific claim about the trans-historical applicability of a certain body of ideas and

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<sup>76</sup> It is interesting to note here how Hanafi’s contention about the relationship between nationalism and *salafism* reverses the one Benedict Anderson (1984) construes in *Imagined Communities*, whereby modern nationalism is itself understood to have been (contingently) constructed along the religious modality. Hanafi’s contention attests to how “modern” he perceives *salafism* to be, and how thoroughly he understands western modalities of power-knowledge to have penetrated Arab intellectual discourse, even among the non-secular elite. That having been said, Hanafi offers little follow up on this insight.

practices—a claim which results in the ultimate failure of *salafism* to grasp the problems of the contemporary Arab condition.

Despite this conception of *salafism* as an historically specific mode of reading religious texts, both authors maintain the puzzling claim that *salafism* offers a rendition of *turath* that entails no interpretation, that it is a “literalist” or “scripturalist” reading that assumes the timelessness of their edicts, prescriptions, and conceptions of the world. Laroui makes this claim more subtly than Hanafi, but both eschew a careful *historical* analysis of how *salafism*’s delimitation of *turath*’s corpus has itself changed over time<sup>77</sup>. Their attunement to historicity aside, both authors provide an ahistorical depiction of *salafism*’s mode of interpreting heritage.

Hanafi also regards the *secular* view that *turath* is “either the cause, or a manifestation, of the backwardness of the [Arab] condition” as carrying the postcolonial beliefs and interests of the Westernized Arab elite (30). He describes this elite as “connected to Europe by intellectual and religious bonds through their education in private (religious and secular) western schools, and/or their presence in the west during the culturally formative years of their lives” (ibid). The result of this “Western” upbringing was alienation from *turath* (ibid). Aside from this characterization of the secular elite (which one could argue applies to Hanafi himself<sup>78</sup>) Hanafi adds that one of the main reasons for the secular elite’s estrangement from *turath* pertains to its association with political oppression and the violation of rights through the mobilization of *turath* as a legitimating discourse by contemporary Arab regimes (1990, 23). Alienated from *turath* by their Western education, and/or the authoritarian interpretation of *turath* by Arab elites, this group fully accepts the universal applicability of Western modernity. In so doing, Hanafi argues, secularism also becomes politically ineffective: on the one hand, it ignores the imperative of deploying *turath* as a resource for achieving social change (29); and, on the other, it appropriates Western knowledge for an incongruous context.

While Hanafi’s account of secularism lacks the nuance of Laroui’s, it shares some of Laroui’s arguments about the impact of exposure to the West on the Arab educated elite in the colonial and postcolonial eras. Both thinkers understand this exposure to have had a deep influence, but whereas Hanafi mostly restricts this impact to the “secular”

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<sup>77</sup> For more on this point, see Meijer, R. 2009. *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>78</sup> Immediately after his graduation with a bachelor’s in philosophy in 1956, Hanafi left to Paris where he spent 10 years at the Sorbonne writing his PhD under the supervision of the phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur and the Orientalist Louis Massignon. Despite his extensive exposure to Western philosophy at the time, Hanafi regards his stay in Paris to have only furthered his interest in studying the Islamic disciplines and to developing an “Islamic method” of interpretation (for more on Hanafi’s intellectual biography, see Carol Kersten, 2011, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*. NY: Columbia University Press). It is therefore interesting to note Hanafi’s reference to spending one’s “culturally formative” years in the West as one of the historical reasons for the emergence of the Arab “secular elite.” However, one should note that most of the well-known figures of the modern and contemporary Arab secular elite have indeed either received Western education or studied in the West. (Qassim Amine Taha Hussein, Sadeq Jalal al-Azm, Burhan Ghalioun, Abdullah Laroui, etc.). It should also be noted that this description applies to many who conceive themselves as non-secular thinkers as well (Hassan Hanafi, Mohamed Arkoun, Abdel Wahab al-Messiri, etc.).

wing of Arab politics,<sup>79</sup> Laroui expands it to cover the entire terrain of Arab ideology, including the position of the “cleric” who calls for a “return to the original principles of Islam” as the way to overcome “Arab backwardness.” More significantly however, whereas Hanafi faults the Arab secular elite for uncritically subscribing to Western theories of progress, Laroui critiques them for maintaining an “eclectic” set of beliefs that blends Western modernity with traditionalist assumptions about the Arab condition. In Laroui’s narrative, it is this eclecticism of Arab seculars, not their wholesale subscription to Western modernity, that leads to their intellectual and political stumbling.<sup>80</sup> Their differences aside, both thinkers critique the various currents of Arab ideology by making an argument about the historically specific nature of their deployment of *turath* (and Western culture in Laroui’s case). For Hanafi as for Laroui, the mobilizations or rejections of *turath* are themselves indicative of the trajectory of Arab ideological thought in colonial and postcolonial time.

Notwithstanding Hanafi’s contention about the historicity of *turath*, he continues to assert its enduring “vibrancy in our contemporary consciousness,” and to posit the “persistence of its ideas and conceptions in the daily lives of the [Arab] masses” (16). Perhaps more importantly, he describes *turath*’s potential as a “theory of action and a director of behavior” for contemporary Arab society (13). This seemingly puzzling formulation, whereby *turath* is considered to be at once historical and contemporary, is resolved by Hanafi’s designation of the “psychological repository of the masses” as the means through which *turath* comes to travel through time.

### **The Kernel of *Turath*: Consciousness as Critique**

Hanafi’s conceptualization of the “psychological repository” and “consciousness” as the vehicles through which *turath* comes to persist through modern times marks his second attempt to critique major currents of contemporary Arab ideology, the first being his reconceptualization of *turath* itself. Significantly, the way Hanafi mobilizes *turath* in the context of his discussion of these two concepts differs from the one he uses above. Specifically, whereas there we saw Hanafi depicting *turath* as historically specific knowledge that requires creative interpretation for it to address contemporary reality, here he posits an understanding of *turath* as a stable presence within the subject’s consciousness that remains unaffected by historical change. The former could be thought of as Hanafi’s argument about what *turath* should be, the latter about what it actually is. In both iterations of the term, however, Hanafi uses *turath* to clarify and situate his intervention in the Arab ideological terrain.

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<sup>79</sup>Rare exceptions to this include Hanafi’s earlier reference to the relationship between *salafism* and nationalism, as well as a claim that Hanafi makes about how the 19<sup>th</sup> century Islamic reformers Afghani and ‘Abduh used the West as model for their formulations of reform at the outset of his *Introduction to Occidentalism* (1992, 24). Both comments are made in passing with no analysis of precisely how Western knowledge has come to influence Islamic reformists or present-day *salafism*.

<sup>80</sup>Laroui’s critique of Arab seculars should not be understood as a call on his part for the indiscriminate embracement of western culture and knowledge. Indeed, much of Laroui’s critique of Arab ideology is aimed at alerting Arab intellectuals to the kinds of influences that western ideology does in fact exercise on the various strands of Arab thought, and to the necessity of understanding and undoing these influences in order to effect a genuine decolonization of the Arab intellectual-subject. For more on Laroui’s position vis-à-vis western ideology, see *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual: Traditionalism or Historicism*, pp x-y.



Hanafi's definition of the "psychological repository of the masses" serves as the first indication of how he seeks to position himself in relation to the *salafi*-secular dichotomy. Hanafi's deployment of the term "masses" or *jamahir* in this formulation carries a distinct "progressive" flavor, due to its association with Arab nationalist and Marxist discourses in the 1950s and 1960s. His usage of the term "psychological" or *nafsiyy* implies an apparent attunement to the discourse of modern social science. In a swift move, however, Hanafi supplements the intuitive connotations of these terms for the 1980s Arab reader with a classically worded elaboration: "Psychology," he tells us in his footnote, does not refer to modern psychological understandings of human behavior. Rather, the word is derived from the term "*nafs*," a classical Arabic term that implies the self or the soul, and which Hanafi identifies as "connoting the inner world of the self which contains the locus of, and motivation for, human behavior" (15). Immediately after this explanation, however, Hanafi adds that in the context of his usage, "*nafs*" has the same meaning as *wai'* or *shu'ur*, *wai'* being the term used by the Arab left to refer to the Marxist notion of "consciousness" and *shu'ur* the word Hanafi later uses as a translation of the phenomenological conception of consciousness<sup>81</sup>.

In a similar fashion, Hanafi defines "masses" or *jamahir* as "a term used in our ancient heritage in a purely epistemological sense to imply the public, *al'amma*, as juxtaposed to the class of philosophers or men of knowledge, *al-khassa*." But this "purely epistemological" distinction between the *'amma* and the *khassa* seems to have been distorted by historical and contemporary delineations of the masses as "superficial, unable to comprehend abstract or theoretical knowledge except when expressed through metaphor or allegory, and unable to establish the verity of propositions [made by authority] because of their tendency to blind obedience and uncritical imitation or *taqlid*<sup>82</sup>" (15). After this summary critique of such distortion of "the masses," Hanafi asserts that his employment of the term carries a positive connotation. In that vein, he supplements the ancient epistemological distinction between the *'amma* and the *khassa* with a "purely practical" understanding of the masses as representing "the capacity for honest self-expression, intuitive recognition [of truth], and spontaneous sensibility." Conceived this way, Hanafi concludes, "the masses represent history, both theoretically and practically" (ibid). Note here how Hanafi's use of "the masses" blends (his construction of) its traditionalist usage with the tropes of "spontaneity," "intuition," and the masses' historical role in effecting social change, all of which bear the unmistakable mark of nationalism and Marxism (or the 'progressive' camp) in modern Arab discourse.<sup>83</sup> This "blended" definition of "psyche" and "masses," in which Hanafi mobilizes ideological terms from the discourse of the Arab left and the Islamist right,

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<sup>81</sup> For an example of how the Arab left had deployed the concept of "consciousness" see the previous chapter on Moroccan historian Abdullah Laroui.

<sup>82</sup> The conception of the masses, *al'amma* or *al'awam*, as connoting the inferior rational capacity of the majority conveys the view that several contemporary Arab thinkers hold about the influence of Abu Hamed al-Ghazali (the Muslim theologian and philosopher, 1058-1111) on Arab-Islamic intellectual and political history. For example, this is the assessment that both Hanafi and Jabiri propose of Ghazali's impact on Islamic philosophy and theology (and through them on Arab consciousness) and Arab reason respectively. For more on Hanafi's (1988) critique of Ghazali, see *From Doctrine to Revolution* (v.1). For more on Jabiri's (1984), see *The Formation of Arab Reason*.

<sup>83</sup> For more on Arab nationalist and Marxist conceptions of the masses' role in political change, see Ismael, T. 1976. *The Arab Left*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

underscores his attempt to appeal to as well as distinguish himself from the two “poles” of the Arab debate as he construes them. Understood as a repository housed in the psyche of the Arab masses, Hanafi portrays *turath* as both constitutive of the Arab masses and of their conception of the world, as well as the resource the Arab masses could mobilize to initiate historical change.

Hanafi juxtaposes his understanding of *turath* to both the *salafi* and secular understandings of the relationship between *turath* and the present. This formulation of *turath*, he indicates, is meant to oppose the views that *turath* consists in “a material body of works to be found in libraries,” or in an “independent body of theory featuring a set of truths” that ought to be protected from attack or forgetfulness (15). While Hanafi does not identify who his interlocutors are in this context, his critique presents a clear rejection of the *salafi* view of *turath*. *Turath*, Hanafi asserts, is not an ideal phenomenon, whereby certain ideational constructs are valorized and understood to be “autonomous from the context in which [they] originally emerged” (ibid). Rather, *turath* is a set of conceptions about the natural and social worlds grounded in the contexts in which they were produced or received. But Hanafi’s critique is also directed at the “secular” view that strips *turath* to its sheer materiality as a historical corpus expressing the time-bound ideological formulations of the Arab ruling elite at a particular stage of Arab-Islamic socioeconomic history. Neither “ideal” nor “material” formulations of *turath* manage to capture the character of its impact on the formation of contemporary Arab subjects. The only way this impact could be properly understood, Hanafi contends, is through the deployment of the concept of “consciousness,” which, in the case of the Arab subject, represents the psychological repository of *turath* as well as the specific components of the present that the subject inhabits.

Compared to Laroui’s dearth of exposition of the term, Hanafi provides his reader with several elaborations of “consciousness” as he conceives it in his work.<sup>84</sup> Whereas Laroui’s curt definition relied on the broad currency of its Marxist usage amongst Arab intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s, Hanafi defines the “structure of consciousness” as the realm that unites the effects of “culture” or ideology and the “infrastructural” terrain of the subject’s existence. Just as with his earlier formulations of *turath* and the “psychological repository of the masses,” Hanafi’s formulation of “consciousness” critiques Arab intellectuals who understand reality as “a relationship between the forces of production and social structures without regard to the significance of the psychological orientation of human beings as itself a part of reality,” or who posit “that a change of ideas is sufficient to effect social change” (53). Each of these views fails to capture the nature of social phenomena. The “phenomenon,” Hanafi tells us,

is neither ideal nor material, but is always a conscious phenomenon, *thahira shu’uriyya*. That is to say, that the infrastructure -social, political, economic- and the superstructure consisting in theories, opinions and inherited traditions or *mawruthat*, are all united in the structures of consciousness, and these are the structures that then determine the behavior of the masses. For reality outside of consciousness is but a void, and theory outside of intention remains thought without action (53).

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<sup>84</sup>This may have been necessary because of the unfamiliarity of Arab audiences with Hanafi’s phenomenological use of the term in the 1980s and 1990s

Hanafi's understanding of the "phenomenon" (especially the human phenomenon) contests the way "materialists" and "idealists" have studied Arab politics and society. According to his formulation, consciousness acts as the kernel of the subject's ideational make-up, as constituted by received or acquired traditions, as well as by that subject's situatedness in a particular social, economic, and political setting. In this view, the subject's "reality" is considered a component of consciousness, in the sense that his understanding of his surroundings is only possible through their internalization as conscious experience, or their conversion into a "conscious phenomenon."<sup>85</sup> To that effect, Hanafi posits, "the structure of consciousness is reality itself, whether through the way these structures constitute the masses who in their turn constitute reality, or through the way they constitute the analyst whose understanding of reality these structures inform" (ibid).<sup>86</sup> Our conception of "reality" and our subsequent engagement with it are both shaped by our "structure of consciousness." In turn, our consciousness is formed by the interaction between our inherited tradition(s) and the social, political and historical contexts that we inhabit, such that "a description of consciousness is a description of the psychological repository of *turath* in its interaction with present reality" (19).<sup>87</sup> Conceived this way, "consciousness" unites "material" and "ideal" elements of the subject's constitution, and eliminates the artificial distinction between "different facets of the same phenomenon" (53).

This understanding of human (social and political) phenomena as composed of both material and ideal elements diverges from positivist approaches that consider social reality an "inert entity" open to "direct examination" and "quantification" in the same manner as natural phenomena (33). The problem with these approaches, Hanafi tells us, is their neglect of the "qualitative" dimension of social reality, of how the subject's "conception of the world and his structure of consciousness" affect his orientation towards that world (53). A "scientific" approach to social reality that ignores how subjects conceive of themselves and their surroundings risks misunderstanding human action, and therefore the constitution of social reality itself. This risk is particularly high in the context of developing countries, where "reality could only be scientifically examined through a qualitative lens, for it is the qualitative [aspect of] reality that still mobilizes the masses and represents the carrier of their ideas and values" (ibid). An

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<sup>85</sup> In the paragraph following this passage, Hanafi succinctly states that both "*turath*...and reality are constituent parts of the contemporary structure of our consciousness" (ibid).

<sup>86</sup> In another context, Hanafi defines reality as composed by "structures of consciousness as well as social conditions, *awda' ijtima'iyya*" ([1980] 1992, 22). His contention that reality is mainly (and only) composed of structures of consciousness in this context should be understood as a dramatization that is meant to set the stage for his subsequent engagement with "materialist" and "idealist" accounts of (Arab) social and political behavior (53).

<sup>87</sup> While Hanafi does not explicitly indicate which human faculties could be/are used to convert external reality into reality-as-conscious-experience, he later argues that consciousness is best suited for a study of human experience because it is "more specific than the human, more important than reason, more intimate than the heart [or emotion], and more neutral than awareness" (132). In that sense, we could understand consciousness as a realm that, per Hanafi, includes and surpasses the analytical, interpretive and motivational capacities of both the rational and affective modes of human experience. Hanafi's usage of the terms *shu'ur* (literally feeling or the locus of feelings), *wai'* (awareness), *wujdan* (moral affect), and *nafs* (inner self or soul) to connote "consciousness" also points in the same direction. Understood this way, consciousness seems to serve as both, a faculty for interpreting the world in accordance with one's ideas and embeddedness-in-the-world, as well as the "locus" where this interpretive activity takes place.

approach that fails to study the (Third World) subject's ideas, values, affective orientations, and subjective interpretations of context—in short, which fails to study his consciousness—also fails to capture the most significant determinants of social and political behavior, particularly among developing societies during the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>88</sup>

Hanafi also critiques “idealist” approaches that explain the problems of the Arab political condition by making an argument about the lasting impact of *turath* on the Arab political subject (53).<sup>89</sup> The problem with this method is that it conceives of *turath* as a corpus of “ideas” existing on a different plane than lived reality, when in fact *turath* is “a live presence in the consciousness of the masses whose values orient their behavior” (ibid). What Hanafi contests here is the conceptual status of the “ideal” component of the subject's experience (which he now reduces to the “*ancient turath*” instead of the more comprehensive formulation he uses above). *Turath* is not a set of ideas or conceptions of the world that have a separate existence outside of the individual's consciousness and that can therefore be adopted or discarded at will. *Turath* is itself a component of individual (and collective) consciousness that shapes thought and behavior, and therefore constitutes part of the social phenomenon itself.

Hanafi's mobilization of “consciousness” as the concept most befitting a study of “developing societies” is reminiscent of Laroui's identification of Arab ideology as the primary lens through which to examine the Arab condition. For Hanafi as for Laroui, the specificity of developing societies (particularly those with a rich cultural heritage) lies in the influence that their cultural histories continue to have on their conceptions of identity and their sociopolitical condition. Indeed, this is why Laroui ultimately argues that positivist (Marxist or liberal) examinations typically fail to account for the sociopolitical behaviors or ideological formulations of Arab peoples. These examinations use the socioeconomic composition or “infrastructure” of Arab societies to explain why Arab individuals or societies behave or conceive of themselves in particular ways. Examinations that adhere “to the tangible and the tangible alone” fail to grasp the impact of the intangible aspects of human experience in the context of colonial and postcolonial societies, whose subjection to western hegemony leads to a divergence between their modes of thought and their socioeconomic condition ([1967] 1995, 26). For Laroui, these “intangibles” consist of the historically specific interpretations of *turath* and western modernity that the intellectual subject produces and uses to understand Arab identity, history, and future. For Hanafi, the intangible part of human experience refers to the dynamic interaction between “present reality” and *turath* within the subject's consciousness that cannot be explained through sociopolitical context alone. For both thinkers, the social and political behavior of the (colonial and postcolonial) Arab subject

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<sup>88</sup> In this particular context, Hanafi refers to the “revolutions of developing countries” to point to the dynamism of these societies. “Revolutions” here refers to the wars (and coups) of independence that were fought by Arab and African states in the 1950s-1970s.

<sup>89</sup> In that sense, Hanafi's critique could be considered as an implicit critique of “culturalist” and “neo-orientalist” approaches to studying the rise of “Islamism,” “political Islam,” and “jihadist Islam” that explain these phenomena through an examination of Islamic texts (Qur'an, prophetic traditions, or the Islamic disciplines).

is a result of the interaction between *turath*, Western modernity,<sup>90</sup> and the subject's particular sociopolitical context.

The crucial distinction between Hanafi and Laroui on this point is their different understandings of what this interaction entails. For Laroui, the interaction between *turath* and modern Arab reality results in different conceptions of *turath* depending on the political context of the subject. In the previous chapter, we saw Laroui outline different interpretations and deployments of the Arab-Islamic heritage by the cleric, the liberal, and the nationalist in colonial, semi-colonial, and postcolonial contexts respectively. Indeed, the necessary impact of historical context on the interpretation of *turath* throughout modern Arab history is the reason why Laroui suggests that no single formulation of *turath* has a real claim to "authenticity"; all accounts are equally "contaminated" by the influence of the radically different historical moment that colonialism initiated. Laroui also shows how *turath* influenced colonial and postcolonial Arab social and political "reality" by shaping the ways Arab intellectuals and political leaders understood "Arab backwardness" and the decisions they made to address it.

In contrast to this dialectic conception of *turath* and present reality, Hanafi emphasizes the influence of *turath* on the formation of reality while understating the impact of reality on the interpretation of *turath*. In other words, the "interaction" that Hanafi envisions between *turath* and "reality" as components of consciousness tends to posit a one-way relationship, whereby *turath* continues to direct the Arab subject's behavior through "its ideas, conceptions, and ideals" (16) while "present reality" has little or no influence on the way *turath* gets (re)interpreted. To be sure, Hanafi's conception offers us a promising formulation about a dynamic two-way relationship between *turath* and reality (whereby *turath* influences the subject's sociopolitical conception of, and action on, reality, while also being reconstituted by the subject's deployment of it in different (historical, social, political) contexts),<sup>91</sup> but his examination of *turath* does not follow up on this promise.

The first hint that Hanafi's conception is unidirectional comes from the way he positions it through idealist accounts of Arab politics and society. The reason he takes issue with these accounts, we will recall, is *not* because they assume that *turath* is a static or timeless body of thought that orients people's actions; rather, Hanafi's problem with ideal formulations is that they assume *turath* to be *merely* a historical body of ideas, rather than a set of motivations and orientations that shape human behavior (53-4). In other words, what troubles Hanafi about idealist explanations of Arab society and politics is their simplistic conception of *turath* as a received tradition that existed independently of Arab consciousness, and not their conception that such a "received tradition" existed as a stable presence independent of human agency and historical context.

Significantly, Hanafi (inadvertently) alternates between two uses of the term *turath*. In the first, he refers to *turath* as historically specific and in need of continuous interpretation. This is the position we saw him adopt in his critique of *salafism*, and

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<sup>90</sup> For Laroui, Western modernity is a significant constituent of Arab subjectivity since the onset of colonialism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. For Hanafi, western modernity is only significant as a constituent of the subjectivity of the Arab "secular" elite as I discuss in the previous section.

<sup>91</sup> This position is also the one in keeping with the European hermeneutic tradition (particularly that of Husserl and Gadamer) in which Hanafi was trained and in which he (occasionally) situates himself. For more on Hanafi's intellectual formation, see Carool Kersten, *Opt. Cit.* 127-150.

corresponds to the way *turath* ought to be in Hanafi's estimate. In the second sense, Hanafi tends to use the *ancient turath*, rather than just *turath*, to refer to *actual* existence of a stable "repository" of inherited ideas in the consciousness of Arab individuals. This is the sense that Hanafi mobilizes to critique secular claims of *turath's* irrelevance to contemporary reality as well as positivist and idealist conceptions of the relationship between thought and reality. Notably, Hanafi does not distinguish between the two senses of *turath*, and sometimes oscillates between both senses within the same paragraph (as in his critique of seculars and *salafis*). His inattention to this distinction notwithstanding, it remains crucial for tracking Hanafi's deployment of *turath* as both a rhetorical ploy against ideological counterparts as well as a conceptual tool to understand and re-make the contemporary Arab subject. It is to the latter part of Hanafi's project that we now turn.

## II. *Turath* as the Problem: Hanafi's Critique of the Political Subject

Hanafi's account of the effect of the ancient *turath* on contemporary Arab consciousness is important for two main reasons. First, it provides us with a critique of contemporary Arab political subjectivity and locates the root of contemporary Arab maladies in the *ancient turath*. Second, it offers us a lens through which to capture Hanafi's conception of the nature and limits of human interpretive capacity. Hanafi's view of human agency is crucial to understanding his project, which is to transform contemporary Arab consciousness via transforming its premises in *turath*. In other words, the point of reconstructing Hanafi's conception of the relationship between *turath* and "reality" is not to assess the extent to which it is loyal to its (occasionally) professed theoretical premises in European hermeneutics. The point is to discern Hanafi's theory of human agency and to evaluate the extent of its convergence with his transformative goals. In the process, I will chart the contours of Hanafi's critique of the contemporary Arab political subject, and his scheme for that subject's transformation.

Hanafi's examination and reconstruction of the ancient *turath* stems from a conviction that it lies at the root of many contemporary Arab social and political problems, as we have seen in his delineation of the "Arab crisis." Notably, this conviction is not one that Hanafi treats as a hypothesis to be proven or an intuition to be confirmed through, say, an anthropological, sociological, or phenomenological study of contemporary Arab politics and societies, or through an analysis of Arab ideology (as we have seen with Laroui, and as we shall later see with Jabiri). Rather, he takes the influence of *turath* as a given, and builds his analysis and his proposal for "renewal" upon this assumption.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> In the "manifesto," Hanafi declares his preliminary intent to establish the extent to which *turath* influences reality through examining "the structures of present reality" and the "structures of [contemporary] consciousness" ([1980], 1992, 26). Hanafi never follows up on this intention neither does he draw on other thinkers' analytic work to fill in the "missing link" between his investment in examining and reconstructing *turath* and its enduring presence in present-day Arab consciousness. It is worth noting that Hanafi's formulation of his intent to examine "present reality" never poses the influence of *turath* as a hypothesis to be confirmed. Instead, he uses the formulation "to evaluate the extent to which *turath* has influenced..." which conveys a conviction that *turath's* influence on social and political reality is a given to be reckoned with rather than a hypothesis to be proven, and that the role of the scholar is to determine the nature and extent of that influence.

Hanafi's definition of the ancient *turath* takes a more concrete turn when he embarks upon its own examination in his multi-volume "heritage and renewal" project. For research purposes, Hanafi conceives of the ancient *turath* as a set of disciplines that have historically constituted the core of Islamic knowledge, and which he delimits to theology or the "fundamentals of religion" (*'ilm usul al-din* or *'ilm al-kalam*), philosophy (*ulum al-hikma*; literally the sciences of wisdom), mysticism (*'ulum al-tasawwuf*), and the fundamentals of jurisprudence (*'ilm usul al-fiqh*; 155). Each of these "sciences" gains its status as germane to *turath* through its historical role in interpreting Islamic "revelation," as found in the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition or *al-sunna*: theology through interpreting revelation's meaning; philosophy through converting these meanings into a worldview; jurisprudence through combining a knowledge of "revelation" and "reality" as the basis for "deducing particular judgments"; and mysticism as a method of interpreting the text that, contra the other disciplines, relies on intuition, not reason (1988a, 232).<sup>93</sup>

Ultimately, Hanafi hopes to provide his reader with a compelling story about how the "structures of consciousness" underlying the hegemonic positions within these disciplines continue to influence the ways the Arab subject conceives of his status in the world, and his modes of knowing and acting upon the world. One of Hanafi's recurring examples of such a "structure" is the one he refers to as "the binary conception of the world" that underlies Islamic theology, jurisprudence, mysticism, and philosophy. In an essay on the "Religious Thinking and the Doubling of Personality," Hanafi ([1969] 1983) defines this conception as one that underlies "traditional religious thought" and that organizes its subject's understanding of the world around the binary division between "Allah and the world, the world and the hereafter, good and evil, angels and demons, permitted and prohibited acts, etc." (126). This binary understanding, he adds, is at the heart of many of the ailments of the contemporary "Egyptian personality," including its fatalism, apathy, and submissiveness (119). This is because the vertical distinction between the realm of divinity and the realm of human life that this binary construes produces in the (Egyptian) subject's consciousness a sense that the divine is an all-powerful entity who resides at the top of a hierarchical structure and whose will is the only force determining every aspect of that structure's operation. This overpowering sense of divine presence as the ultimate authority that wills every thing, being, and action into existence leads to the "atrophy of human action, and its relegation to the realm of worship rather than the realm of reality... ultimately leading to the transformation of human freedom to fatalism" (128). Likewise for the division between "this world and the hereafter" whose assimilation into the subject's consciousness leads to his resignation from worldly affairs and concerns, and to directing his energy towards the hereafter "where he will find what he had missed in this world" (ibid).

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<sup>93</sup>This identification of *turath* as founded by "revelation" gives it a peculiarly Islamic character, and excludes other modalities of examining *turath* that consider pre-Islamic modalities of thinking and self-expression as constitutive of historic and contemporary Arab consciousness. Examples of this include studies of Arab linguistics and aesthetics in pre-Islamic times. In the next chapter, for instance, we shall see how Jabiri includes an examination of the development of the various disciplines of Arabic language (grammar, poetry, rhetoric) in his consideration of *turath*. For a consideration of *turath* through the lens of aesthetics (poetry and literature) see Adonis' (1974), *al-thabet wa al-mutahawwel: bahth fi al-ittiba' wa al-ibda' 'inda al-arab* (The Constant and the Changing: A Study of Emulation and Creativity in Arab history). Beirut: Dar al-talee'a.

Hanafi's vague formulation of the effect of the "binary worldview" on the subject's conception of his will, judgment and disposition towards his lived reality becomes much clearer in Hanafi's later works, as we shall see later in this chapter. What the early Hanafi essay offers us, however, is a lucid historicization of that conception, or, to put it more accurately, as lucid an historical account of that conception as one could find within Hanafi's corpus. This brief historical narrative will help orient my subsequent interpretation of Hanafi's re-examination of the "binary" in his major oeuvre, *Heritage and Renewal*.

This binary mode of conceiving the world, Hanafi tells us, represents a divergence from the "original" relationship between "thought and reality" that revelation instituted in early Islamic times. This original relationship had an interactive and dialectic character, whereby "the descent of every verse [of the Qur'an] corresponded to a rationale in lived reality," and once that reality superseded that rationale or need, "the verse was oftentimes replaced with another better-suited to reality's change or progress" (ibid).

What is distinct about this "original" relationship between revelation and reality is that it entails an agentive understanding of the human subject, and a dynamic conception of the "text." The subject of revelation received, interpreted, and acted on revelation's edicts in accordance with his lived reality, but his actions themselves prompted a change of revelation to meet that reality's needs. By "change in revelation," Hanafi means the constant interpretive engagement of the subject of revelation with its edicts, and his exercise of bringing these edicts to bear in time and space. Hanafi sees evidence of the divine intention to render revelation dynamic in the gradual "descendance" or *nozool* of the Qur'an to Muhammad, in accordance with the different stages and events of the early Islamic period (what is usually referred to as *asbab al-nozool* or the "reasons for revelation" in Qur'anic exegesis), as well as in the changes in Qur'anic rulings as the Islamic community developed and matured. For example, an injunction forbidding Muslims to pray while drunk became an injunction against drinking alcohol altogether; changes usually referred to as *al-nasekh wa al-manshookh* (abrogating and abrogated verses). Revelation, a term that Hanafi uses interchangeably with "thought" in this context, is not an inert body of instructions to be followed by its believers. It is a dynamic presence whose understanding is conditioned upon lived reality and which constantly (re)produces itself in response to reality's needs. The subject's agency thus resides in his ability to interpret, to act, and where needed, to bring his judgment to bear on situations where revelation is silent. His internal homogeneity—that is, his sense of continuity between divine revelation and lived reality—is a result of the intimate and dynamic relationship between the ideational and experiential dimensions of his existence. Put slightly differently, early Muslim consciousness was one whose "ideal" and "material or reality-related" components had a dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship, and produced "a unified personality, whose thought was his reality, whose composition conveyed his news, whose sayings corresponded to his doings, and whose interior paralleled his exterior" (127).

This original relationship was first distorted during the times of the "*fitna*" or the "Great Upheaval" (656 AD), when Muslims were divided amongst themselves in their support of rival political leaders after the death of Othman ibn-Affan (the third caliph after Mohamed). At that time, Hanafi tells us, "some of the prominent figures in Islam [*al-sahaba* or the prophet's companions] preferred a life of isolation and contemplation



over one of worldly strife, and in so doing chose thought over reality. Others, however, chose reality over thought, attempting to control the former while neglecting the latter [Mu'awiya ibn abi-sufyan, the first Umayyad Khalif]" (127).<sup>94</sup> Herein, Hanafi concludes, lay the birth of the separation between "thought and reality" in Islamic history, a separation that was subsequently fed and consolidated by the dominant positions within theology, philosophy, jurisprudence and mysticism alike.

Dominant discourses within each of these disciplines have deepened the rift between divine revelation and the worldly social and political concerns of Muslims, from the time of the *fitna* up until the present day. This "binary conception" construed the realm of divine revelation as timeless and perfect, distinct from and in control of human reality. In that vein, Hanafi gives the example of the predominance of the Platonic worldview in religious thought (both Muslim and Christian) that divided the world into two distinct realms, the divine (or the world of Forms) and the human, and which therefore condemned "every religious orientation that sought unity between God and the world, or the soul and the body from Ibn-'Arabi to Spinoza" (128). Likewise, "the hypothetical school of jurisprudence" that formulated solutions to non-existing problems gained in power in comparison to its "realistic" counterparts that creatively engaged real life concerns (ibid).

This fissure between (human and divine) thought and the lived reality of Muslims culminated in Ottoman times, when "mysticism became a belief in the ability of the *awliya*' (endowed ones) to perform miracles and disrupt the habits of nature, when *kalam* became an official theology revolving around the attributes of the divine, when philosophy became devoted to the destruction of rational thought, and dedicated to issuing fatwas in accordance with the wishes of the sultan" (ibid). Each of these discourses was underlain by, and furthered, the binary (and hierarchical) conception of the world. In this view, Ottoman-time mysticism portrayed nature as an entity that could not be grasped by rational reflection and that unraveled due to contingent divine intervention; theology disengaged from the active interpretation of revelation in accordance with the needs of the time, and dwelled on the nature and attributes of divinity; philosophy's Neo-Platonic bent took it in a similar direction to that of theology; and jurisprudence, initially the science of finding creative solutions for real-life problems, devoted itself to the service of "the ruler." These instantiations of the "binary" not only point to the deepening separation between the realm of divinity and the realm of human reality, they also present a narrative about how the disciplines of *turath* have come to buttress the power of the ruling elite.

Hanafi does not provide an historical argument about how the Islamic disciplines came to be appropriated as legitimating discourses for political authority, as does Jabiri. What he offers is a conceptual argument about how these disciplines' movement away from the realm of lived reality (the social and political problems faced within a particular historical context) towards the realm of "divinity" (the examination of divine essence and attributes in theology, the illuminationist conception of truth in mysticism and philosophy, and the emulation of tradition in jurisprudence) led to the disengagement of these disciplines and their subjects from politics, and the consequent entrenchment of the

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<sup>94</sup>Hanafi ([1969], 1983) adds that those who have tried to keep the connection between thought and reality where either killed (Hassan and Hussein) or separated themselves from the (mainstream) Muslim community (*al-khawarej*) (127).

status quo. We also find in Hanafi's early work hints about what *Heritage and Renewal* will later explore at some length, namely the transposition of the Allah/world binary, and of the binary conception of the world more generally, onto the political sphere, leading to the consecration of political authority not only as predestined by the divine, but also as the representation of divine will on earth. In that vein, the late Hanafi (1988) shows how late theological texts used the same terms and qualities to describe both political rulers and the divine (v.1, 30-35). Through such transposition, theologians consolidated the power of the ruler by juxtaposing the "oneness" of the divine and the ruler to the "many-ness" of the creations and the ruled. Indeed, as Hanafi later notes about the dominant *Ash'arite* theology, "it represented both *turath* and political power, and had been the ruling doctrine since the predicament of the Mu'tazalites and up until this day" (201).

It is worth noting that Hanafi's account of the reigning conception of the world does not represent it as the only extant conception in Islamic history. At every historical juncture, he tells us, there existed counter-discourses that attempted to subvert the dominant modality of the thought-reality relationship. Mu'tazalite theologians, *Maliki* jurists, the prominent mystic Ibn-'arabi, Averroes and 19<sup>th</sup> century Islamic reformists all attempted to recreate the "original" relationship between revelation and reality, but none of these historical figures or schools were able to challenge the hegemony of their counterparts. The result, Hanafi concludes, was the conversion of this binary modality of conceiving the world into a "structure of consciousness" that eventually came to represent religion itself (128).

The problematic that Hanafi tries to underscore through this narrative is how the entrenchment of this binary modality in the ancient *turath* led to the distortion and eventual suspension of the agency of the Arab-Muslim subject. Whereas this subject once had the capacity to creatively engage with, interpret, and perform revelation in order to bring it to bear on lived reality, he now emerges as a subject whose energies are directed at the realm of divinity instead of the world, and who is therefore resigned to divine predestination. Hanafi's early thoughts on subjectivity becomes clearer later; what is important to underline here is Hanafi's preliminary historicization of the relationship between the "binary conception of world" and what he conceives as the fatalism and submissiveness of contemporary "Egyptian personality." The picture that Hanafi paints for us rather dramatically is, in other words, of a consciousness whose *turath* and reality components were no longer engaged in mutual interaction, and where *turath*, now overtaken with a "binary conception of the world," shapes that subject's understanding of, and engagement with, his social and political context.

Hanafi returns to examining the nature and impact of the "binary conception of the world" on contemporary Arab consciousness in his study of Islamic theology in *From Doctrine to Revolution*. Here, Hanafi highlights the centrality of this binary to the entire corpus of Islamic theology across its various historical stages:

The various terms [of Islamic theology] imply a particular mental division that in its turn conveys a particular kind of religious experience. This experience is sometimes expressed in the language of existence as in the division between the imperative (*wajib*) [the divine] and the possible (*momken*) [creation], and at others in the language of logic as with affirmation (*al-ithbat*) and negation (*al-nafii*), and still at others in the language of metaphysics as with the conception of unity (*al-wehda*) and plurality (*al-kathra*)... The truth however is that all these categorizations refer to the vertical character [of human

experience], whereby being is itself polarized between two poles: the positive and the negative, being and nothingness, the one and the many...all of which are meant to express the concepts of divinity (*al-ilahiyyat*) in the language of pure reason” (1988, vol.1, 400-01).

The “vertical religious experience” that underlies the various categories of Islamic theology and philosophy is, as Hanafi later explains, characterized by a conception of the divine as distinct from and presiding over the world, and as the entity in relation to which all human thought and action becomes intelligible (85). According to the dominant (Ash’arite) position within Islamic theology, he adds, natural and human phenomena are to be understood through how they relate to the realm of divinity. In that view,

God is in relationship with nature when in the form of a miracle... with [human] freedom in the form of [divine] will... with [human] reason in the form of revelation, sacred law or *shar’*, and transmitted knowledge or *naql*... with the identification of good and evil through His creation of all things including human action...As such, God, through His attributes and actions, is conceived [by ancient theologians] as in relationship with all human problems (85-6).

Hanafi finds this view of divine will as the mediator between human action and its effect, and between human reason and its exercise of judgment, as deeply problematic due to its denigration of human agency. As with his earlier view on the original revelation-reality relationship, Hanafi does not regard this position as representing religious orthodoxy, but contends that it represents a divergence from the proper relationship that he now refers to as “the horizontal worldview.” The horizontal view understands the human world as a relationship between the human being and his context guided by a revealed text that, in its turn, is always in a state of reinterpretation with changing times and spaces. Accordingly, the exercise of human reason or freedom should be considered a relationship between the human mind and a particular (earthly) situation and not with a divine will that the human subject embodies or to which he conforms (*ibid*). In that vein, questions regarding political legitimacy should be considered through the lens of the exercise of human judgment in choosing a leader, and of will to consent to that leader rather than one of a “vertical” divine endowment. In considering divine will to be the ultimate arbitrator in every human activity, ancient theological conceptions of the divine actually subvert the “intended” relationship between God and the human such that instead of revelation being “God’s intentionality or *qasd* towards the human...providing him with a system (*nitham*) for his life and livelihood,” it is mistakenly conceived as “human intentionality towards God that provides a theory about His essence, attributes and actions on a purely hypothetical basis” (87). By inverting the “proper” relationship between revelation and humanity, Islamic theology introduced a conception of the natural and human worlds as “negative” poles that were always on the receiving end of provisions (miracles, will, or legislation) from the ultimate “positive” pole of divinity.

The real significance of this vertical or binary conception of the world is in the effect it has on contemporary Arab consciousness. Hanafi posits that it is

responsible for the eradication of our capacity for conducting scientific analysis of [natural and social] phenomena...of life, freedom, politics or ethics. It does this through

eradicating the independence of these phenomena and by tying them to another cause, Allah...who always serves as their First Cause...this in its turn results in the alienation of the human being who conceives of the ways of the world as always controlled by a personalized transcendent Subject, and not by the actual conditions of the world (86).

By this account, the binary structure of consciousness that underlies the writings of ancient theologians is either the ultimate or the most significant cause for the incapacity of modern Arab subjects to conceive of natural and social phenomena as immanent to the natural and human worlds, and therefore to develop a proper or “scientific” understanding of the patterns that guide natural and human activity. In a similar vein, Hanafi later argues that theology’s tendency to identify the divine as the single and ultimate locus of being, or as “the one,” and his creations as “the many,” is the reason why “absent from our national consciousness have been the unity of personality without hypocrisy, the unity of classes with no division between rich and poor, national unity between the various factions of the political struggle, political unity between newly independent countries, and economic unity between states with complementary economies” (1988, 449-50, v.1).

Hanafi’s narrative about the influence of the disciplines of *turath* on contemporary Arab consciousness follows a pattern, whereby he identifies the hegemonic conception of the world within a particular discipline before projecting it onto the contemporary ailments of Arab subjectivity. Absent an historical or conceptual argument about how these dominant positions come to persist till the present, Hanafi’s formulation of the relationship between a modern-day quality and its underlying “cause” in ancient consciousness makes it difficult to discern how the former comes to be an instantiation of the latter. In the example above, Hanafi proposes that the political, social, and economic fragmentation of the “Arab nation” is a result of the juxtaposition between the one God and his many creations. Hanafi seems to suggest a necessary relationship between the plurality of creation and the detrimental divisions within Arab society, but he does not explain how plurality transpires into fragmentation. Notwithstanding these unsubstantiated projections, or “leaps” as Abu Zayd (1990) refers to them, the overall thrust of Hanafi’s argument implies that the causes of this problem lie in the conception of the divine and human worlds as two separate realms guided by two opposing principles, the first being the realm of unity, will, and knowledge, and the latter of division, submission, and passive reception. If and when this separation could be transformed into a dynamic and dialectic relationship like the one that existed between “revelation” and “reality” in early Islamic times, the subject’s conception of these two worlds and the principles animating them are bound to change. If we recast Hanafi’s formulation about the disunity of Arab society based on an inter-connected or “horizontal” view of the divine-human relationship, for instance, we could imagine a situation where the unity of the divine could possibly become the principle guiding the social and political worlds. Indeed, it is in that light that we should read Hanafi’s statement that “monotheism or *al-tawheed*” (literally, unification) should be understood as “the unity of humanity, of history, of truth, of the human subject, of the family, etc.” as well as “a process of unification (1992, 153-4).”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup>Still, this (charitable) interpretation does not explain Hanafi’s attribution of sociopolitical fragmentation to the plurality of creation. Ultimately, the explanation that works best for Hanafi’s projection of the

Hanafi's assumption about the continued influence of the binary conception of the world on Arab consciousness in the present should likewise be understood in light of the effect it has on the realm of intellectual activity. As noted earlier, Hanafi considers the theological (namely, the dominant Ash'arite) conception of human judgment and actions as being entirely dependent on divine will to undermine the creative capacities of the subject of theology. According to his narrative, the fall of intellectual activity results from the dominance of the binary conception of the world in Arab consciousness, a conception that dampens the human subject's intellectual curiosity and agency through casting the world as undecipherable and unalterable by human reason and action. Hanafi also conceives of intellectual activity as having the primary formative influence on human consciousness. This is why Hanafi believes that *turath*, a body of intellectual works produced in the first seven centuries of Islamic history, has had a profound effect on Arab consciousness in the past as in the present; it is also the reason why he insists a creative intellectual engagement with *turath* is the way Arab consciousness could be transformed. Put together, the lack of intellectual activity during the past seven centuries, and the formative role that such activity plays in forming human consciousness, explain Hanafi's contention that Arab consciousness had been stagnant during that time.

Indeed, Hanafi's seems to conceive of historical change as primarily driven by human intellectual activity. In a telling formulation about the relationship between "text" and "history," Hanafi (2005) writes,

The text is not a product of history or a mere reflection of it; the text is what determines history and imposes itself upon it. The text has an independence from history, and history is but its carrier. The text is independent of history, and history manifests itself in it. (32)

Hanafi's emphasis on the independence and even priority of human thought in history does not necessarily mean that he trivializes the subject's non-intellectual engagement with the world, or that he considers it an illegitimate form of agency. To be sure, he expounds upon the Arab struggles for national liberation during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as representative of the emancipatory capacities of Arab consciousness (1992, 54). What Hanafi seems to imply, however, is that such historical moments of agency do not translate into a constituent of human consciousness, or a component of the "psychological repository of the masses," unless they are formulated into intellectual products that can then inform, indeed even *form*, the consciousness of future generations. In that sense, the potential agency of Arab struggles for national liberation can only be honed and sustained if it is used to "eliminate the roots of backwardness in [Arab] consciousness" (56). Since for Hanafi these "roots" lie in the problematic structures of consciousness inherited from the Islamic disciplines, any effective way of "eliminating" them has itself to operate on the intellectual level, that is, through the examination, critique, and reconstruction of the ideas and the premises of these disciplines.

Though Hanafi's Hegelian-phenomenological orientation comes out clearly in the earlier statement where he asserts the independence of human thought from history, he

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ancient "structure of consciousness" onto contemporary sociopolitical Arab reality is to consider these "leaps" as his attempt to provide repeated justification for the necessity of renewing *turath* through stressing (if not arguing) its contemporary relevance.

generally tends to be more tentative in formulating the relationship between intellectual activity (the text, thought, revelation) and reality or historical context. Even in his tentative formulations, however, intellectual activity takes precedence over “practical action” as the animating force behind historical change, precisely because of its consciousness-forming role. To be able to play that role, Hanafi formulates “thought” as deeply entwined with, and embedded in, the contextual concerns of its day.

In the introduction to his Heritage and Renewal project (the manifesto), Hanafi submits, “thought as I understand it here is not abstract thought, but living thought that directs people’s actions. Indeed, thought consists in the motivations and conceptions-of-the-world that shape peoples’ daily lives” (1992, 54). For social and political change to take place, he adds, these motivations and conceptions of the world need to be aligned with the desired “direction” of change, for “change does not occur unless there is a consciousness-of-change,” which can only be brought about through “intellectual activity” that transforms the premises upon which people conceive, experience and act on their reality (54). “Thought” or intellectual activity for Hanafi thus forms the necessary condition for a genuine and sustained process of social and political change, “revolution” in Hanafi’s parlance, a change that does not occur in ephemeral spurts and cannot be extinguished through oppression, exactly because it operates on a “radical” level, on the level of the “roots” of the subject’s ideas and beliefs.

This conception of intellectual activity as a way of cultivating revolutionary subjectivity—of forming a subject oriented towards the well-being of the collective, capable of taking initiative on its behalf, and having a distinct vision for its future—is reminiscent of Laroui’s depiction of the role of the intellectual in the Third World. For Laroui as for Hanafi, “culture,” and more specifically its bearer, *al-muthaqqaf* or the intellectual,<sup>96</sup> is the agent of transforming the mental and affective disposition of the Arab subject, such that this subject is capable of instituting the social and political changes required to effect “modernity.” Whereas for Laroui this transformation necessarily entails orienting the Arab subject away from *turath* and its “traditionalist” mode of understanding the world, for Hanafi, the cultivation of a new Arab consciousness cannot be achieved without a constructive critique of *turath*, the primary constituent of that subject’s consciousness.

### **III. Renewal: Reconstructing The Subject of *Turath***

According to Hanafi’s narrative, the eclipse of creative human agency in Islamic history since the 7<sup>th</sup> hijri century is not solely the result of the stagnation of intellectual activity<sup>97</sup>. As we have seen, Hanafi claims that both intellectual stagnation and the

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<sup>96</sup>The Arabic word for the intellectual, *al-muthaqqaf*, literally means “the bearer of culture.”

<sup>97</sup>Hanafi (1990) periodizes Arab-Islamic history in seven-century-intervals as follows: The first stage between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> hijri centuries (7<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) “witnessed the birth, development, and epitome of Islamic civilizations in the 4<sup>th</sup> hijri century before the beginning of its demise with Ghazali’s repudiation of the rational sciences” (34). The second stage, from the 8<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> hijri centuries (14<sup>th</sup>- 20<sup>th</sup> AD), comprised the age of regurgitating, explaining and summarizing what that civilization had created in its heyday. The third stage, beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup> hijri century (late 20<sup>th</sup> century AD) and extending to the 21<sup>st</sup> hijri century, is what Hanafi hopes to be the time when Arab intellectuals “could build on the reform movement that emerged towards the end of the second stage” (35), by which he means the Arab *Nahda* that tentatively lasted from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

withering of the political and cultural agency of Arab consciousness result from the insufficient theorization of human agency in the Islamic disciplines. Hanafi's main critique of Islamic theology, we will recall, is that the dominant (Ash'arite) conception of human judgment and ability cultivates a subject who understands his capacity to think and act as always dependent upon, and mediated by, divine will. Hanafi regards such a subject as incapable of engaging in a "scientific" understanding of the natural and sociopolitical worlds, i.e., one that sees them as results of consequential relationships between (natural and human) entities that can be comprehended and therefore engaged with and controlled. At the most basic level, however, what seems to concern Hanafi the most about the subjectivity comprised by Ash'arite theology is its tendency to suspend capacity for judgment, and to believe that this capacity can only be exercised by a divine power upon which it is dependent.

Filled with a deep sense of uncertainty about the effects of human judgment and action, and acquiescent to the status quo as predestined by a transcendental will, this theological subject emerges as one who submits passively to authority, be it divine or political. Such a subject is not disposed to think about human collectivity as a domain of responsibility and initiative, or as a locus of cultivating the well-being of its members. It is with these concerns in mind that Hanafi approaches his reconstruction of theology, which he tellingly titles *From Doctrine to Revolution*.<sup>98</sup>

Hanafi's reconstruction of Islamic theology begins with the contention that the absence of a clear and well-developed theorization of the "human" in theology, and in the *turath* more generally, should not be taken as a sign of the absence of human agency. In fact, "the human, and, more specifically, human consciousness was always there [in theology], though its presence tended to be hidden behind examinations of divinity" ([1980] 1992, 133). Hanafi adds that the absence of the human figure should be understood as a sign of its active presence in early Islamic history, when the human was the "bearer of revelation, the maker of civilization, and the conqueror of nations" (132). At the time, what was at stake was the concept of monotheism that was endangered by ancient polytheism and paganism, and not the human agency that was active in shaping history. But this concern with defending transcendental divinity against polytheistic conceptions of the divine subsequently developed into a "vertical conception of the world" that ascribes a strict hierarchical relationship between the divine and the human whereby the human is marked as the recipient of divine messages, the submitter to divine will, and the follower of divine commands. Crucially, this "vertical conception of the world" eschews a "horizontal conception" relating the divine (revelation) and the human, whereby revelation is brought to bear on historical reality through continuous interpretation and application by the human subject. In the horizontal model, the divine is a guide for that subject's orientation towards the world, and not a diversion of that subject's energies away from the world (1988, 87).

At its heart, Hanafi's reconstruction of Islamic theology is meant to recover the "original" horizontal relationship between the divine and the human subject. Hanafi achieves this goal by unearthing more "horizontal" understandings of divine and human

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<sup>98</sup>Hanafi's rendition of Ash'arite theology as promoting a passive and submissive subjectivity should be understood in the context of Ash'arism being the official theology in Egypt, and of the general perception of the historical role played by Ash'arism in consolidating the political rule of the Abbasids and the Ottomans.

will and judgment in the Islamic theological tradition, and by inaugurating these understandings as more befitting of both “divine intentionality” and the spirit of the current times. But Hanafi also recovers the “human” in theology on a more overarching level by reconstructing Islamic theology as *itself* a study about the human. This theology reflects the subject’s yearning for divine perfection and for a relationship between the immanent and transcendent aspects of his life and being. Hanafi’s renewal of theology not only reconstructs the human *in* theology, it also reconstructs theology as *itself* a study of the human condition.

Hanafi’s renewal of theology starts with the exercise of renaming its various components. He reconstructs the two major components of theology, the study of divinity (*al-ilahiyyat*) and the study of oral traditions about prophethood and the Day of Judgment (*al-sam’iyyat*), as “the human” and “history” respectively. The study of the human is in its turn divided into two main categories: the first, traditionally called “monotheism” and comprising an examination of “divine essence and attributes,” is reconstructed as the “ideal human being,” and specifically, as the human experience of the divine, and the “attributes” of the human subject who embodies perfection. The second, traditionally the study of “divine justice” through an examination of the human ability to “create acts” and to judge right from wrong (rebuke and approbation), is considered by Hanafi as a study of the “actual human being” and of his “freedom” and “reason” (1988, v.5, 319-320).

Hanafi’s reconstruction of oral traditions, which he considers representative of ancient conceptions of “history,” attempts to recover the human as the primary agent of historical change. He reconfigures the study of prophecy and the Day of Judgment as the history of humanity or “general history,” which comprises “the historical experience of humanity, the trajectories of different peoples, the rise and fall of nations, etc.” (320). Together, these histories form the “history of thought, which is also the history of consciousness or historical consciousness” (*ibid*). Hanafi forges an intimate relationship between “general history” and “actual or particular history,” the latter being the realm of “faith, deeds, and the imamate (political rule),” or in Hanafi’s parlance, “theory, practice, and political rule and revolution” (321). This relationship entails the fusion of the two “histories” within individual consciousness when historical consciousness (general history) is transmitted via revelation into “the consciousness of the individual, thus making it historical, and deeming individual consciousness responsible for human history, and for pushing it towards its ultimate end and goal in Judgment Day” (*ibid*).

Aside from Hanafi’s Hegelian understanding of history as the movement of abstract consciousness (or, for Hanafi, as revelation) that gets embodied in the consciousness and practices of individuals and institutions,<sup>99</sup> it is important to note that Hanafi conceives of history as primarily the domain of human will, action, and responsibility. To be sure, he understands individual human consciousness or *al-wai’i al-fardi* to be influenced by “historical consciousness,” as expressed in revelation. Yet Hanafi understands this influence as one that orients rather than determines the subject’s disposition towards history. In that vein, he posits,

Human action in history—that is, action that is conscious of the past and committed to the present—determines the course of history in the future.

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<sup>99</sup>In a footnote at the outset of his study on Islamic legal theory, Hanafi (2005) refers to himself as a “Hegelian Islamist” (footnote 2, p.11).



Judgment Day or *al-ma'ad* then takes place as a culmination of the human act... History is actualized through the human act which is based on knowledge and conviction [in the divine]. This act takes the form of the word and the deed, both of which convey the knowledge and belief that underlie them. (1988, v.5, 321).

What Hanafi delineates here is a teleological conception of history, where history is conceived to begin with prophecy and end on Judgment Day. Yet this teleology does not determine the trajectory of human actions in history; rather, the culmination of history in its *telos* is itself the result of human agency, which “pushes” history towards its intended aim or *ghaya* at the end of time. The human act, in the realm of “particular history or *al-tarikh al-muta'ayyin*,” comes as a result of faith or *al-iman* that is based upon knowledge and conviction and that expresses itself in action. The realm of politics is for Hanafi the realm of human action *par excellence*. He concludes the foregoing exposition of the nature of human action and its relationship to history by stating, “since the individual does not live by himself but in a group, the political order emerged as the epitome of the human act, and the state came to represent the continued presence of the individual and the embodiment of his choice” (321).

Before examining how Hanafi reconstructs political rule or the “imamate” as the realm of human choice, it is important to understand how he reconfigures the dominant Ash'arite understanding of human judgment and will. This understanding revolves around the conception of divine will as a precondition for human thought and behavior. In the foregoing discussion of the effects of the binary conception of the world on human “reason” and “freedom,” we have seen how Hanafi represents the relationship between the human and the world as always mediated by divine will, which inhibits the human subject's sense of responsibility for his actions and dampens his motivation to exercise his reason and will.<sup>100</sup> In his reconstruction, Hanafi de-centers this understanding and replaces it with the Mu'tazalite position on the “creation of acts or *khalq al-af'al*” and “rebuke and approbation or *al-husn wa al-qubh*.” According to Hanafi, the Mu'tazalite position conceives of the human subject as divinely endowed with the ability to distinguish between the rightful and wrongful paths and to act upon his judgments, and therefore to bear responsibility for his thoughts and actions before God. For the Mu'tazalites, the human subject's ability to “create his acts” in accordance with his judgment is a corollary of the conception of the divine as just; divine justice implies that God could not hold His creations responsible for their choices if He did not create within them the ability to decide right from wrong and to act accordingly. As a result, human injustice cannot be attributed to divine will (v.3, 60-71). Juxtaposing the Mu'tazalite

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<sup>100</sup>It is worth noting that Hanafi's figuration of the Ash'arite position on human will and judgment brings it much closer to the more conservative (and historically prior) Jabriyya position, which considers human thought and action to be entirely predetermined by God. Indeed, in defining the Ash'arite position on the matter (usually referred to as *kasb* meaning earning one's acts), Hanafi notes that it is merely “a variation on the divine over-determination of human action proposed by the theory of *jabr*” (1988, v.3, 116). It is important to note that Hanafi's interpretation of the Ash'arite position is a contested one. Jabiri (1984), for instance, contends that the Ash'arite position on human will and judgment is more proximate to the Mu'tazalite position (the one that Hanafi privileges) than it is to the Jabriyya. Hanafi's interpretation of the dominant Ash'arite position should be understood as the dominant and official one within Islamic theology, and the one adopted by religious institutions in Egypt specifically.

position to its Ash'arite counterpart, Hanafi writes, "Proving that the human being is the creator of his acts represents the highest level of progress attained by humanity thought. By virtue of this principle, the human being becomes a true actor, not merely a veil or mask behind which lies the real actor and where the human being is merely a metaphorical one" (186).

Hanafi reconstructs the Mu'tazalite position regarding the "creation of acts" as "human freedom," and judgment of the "good" (*al-husn*) and the "bad" (*al-qubh*) as "human reason." These two principles are organically connected—human beings "create acts" that reflect their moral judgments and for which they then bear responsibility. Thus Hanafi argues that the relationship between "freedom" and "reason" is complementary, since "human freedom cannot exist except on the basis of the human capacity to judge right from wrong...so that this freedom would not be subject to whim or an expression of impulse" (1988, v.3, 353-4). For Hanafi as for the Mu'tazalites, the subject's freedom consists in his ability to act according to reasoned judgments, or judgments that emanate from the inherent human capacity to recognize right from wrong.<sup>101</sup> It is the freedom to carry out and "command" the "good" and right, and to refrain from and publically "rebuke" the "bad" and wrong. As Hanafi later points out, the Mu'tazalite conception of human will and judgment provide the requisite condition for the Qur'anic injunction to "command the good and admonish the bad, *al-amr b-alma'roof wa al-nahii 'an al-monkar*," within the community of believers, which for them constitutes one of the pillars (*usul*) of theology, and which for Hanafi constitutes one of the main resources for orienting the subject's "reason" and "will" towards the "common good" of the political community.

Despite his recasting of these concepts into a "modern" terminology, Hanafi's conceptions of "freedom" and "reason" have their roots in a theological view of the origin and purpose of human will and judgment. For the Mu'tazalites as for the Ash'arites, human will and judgment are divine endowments. The difference between the two positions, as Jabiri (1986) will elaborate, is that the Ash'arites understand the divine intervention that endows the human subject with his ability to judge and to act as constant; it is expressed in every thought and action. The Mu'tazalites, on the other hand, believe that will and judgment have been bestowed upon the human subject at the moment of its creation (314). For both schools, however, the ultimate purpose of vesting the human subject with will and judgment is for him to know the divine and to act according to that knowledge, or bear the consequences. In both cases, neither will nor reason are understood as having their origins in the subject and serving the subject's own purposes. Rather, these capacities originate in divine will, and are meant to fulfill a divinely-ordained purpose (to know God, to command the good and rebuke the bad, etc.). That being said, the Mu'tazalite understanding of human will and judgment as originally created by, but then independent of, divine will provides Hanafi with a foundation for his theorization of the human subject's ability to "choose" and "contest" his political ruler.

Hanafi conceives of the realm of the imamate, or of "rule and revolution" as he renames it, as the place where "doctrine becomes law, and conception turns into order" (v.5, 137). Clearly, Hanafi is not positing politics as a sphere distinct from theology, or

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<sup>101</sup> The Mu'tazalites conceive of "right" and "wrong" as judged by reason to precede, and necessarily converge with, the "right" and "wrong" of revelation. This is based on the principle that "reason precedes revelation, or *al-'aql qabl worood al-sam*" (1998, v.3, 371).

political subjectivity as radically departing from its religious counterpart. Rather, he construes both spheres as continuous with one another: the political is the site where the subject's knowledge of and belief in the divine is actualized into a collective engagement with the world (ibid). It is only in the actualization of this knowledge and belief into collective practice that the human act finds its "completion" (321). Forming groups and living together necessitates the political organization of collective existence; this organization, Hanafi seems to assume, cannot be rendered separate from its constituents' "theoretical knowledge" and "belief" as to what constitutes "right and wrong." Rather, the domain of human collectivity is where such knowledge should be put into practice.

Hanafi conceives any attempts to separate doctrine from politics as "the choice of incumbent authority that senses its illegitimacy and that wants to distance people from politics and render them apolitical in order to curtail the possibility of revolution" (140). This, as we shall recall, is Hanafi's main political critique of the "binary conception of the world," which renders the divine separate from worldly concerns and therefore averts the subject's agency away from engaging with his lived reality (the realm of finite existence) and towards the realm of the eternal. When Hanafi asserts the organic connectedness of doctrine and politics (the sphere of rule and revolution), he is attempting to restore the "original" horizontality of the relationship between these two spheres, of reconstructing politics as the domain where doctrine fulfills its "divine intentionality" of providing guidance for the human subject in the various realms of his life, including that of collective existence. He is also advocating for revelation to be brought into everyday life through a continuous interpretive process. This suggests that Hanafi conceives the Islamic doctrine or *'aqida* as a means through which a political, indeed a revolutionary, subjectivity could be cultivated and sustained.

Hanafi's reconstruction of the political component of Islamic theology, or the imamate, is less a conception of a "just" institutional arrangement than a set of principles orienting the subject of doctrine towards the realm of politics. Hanafi reconstructs theological positions on the "mode through which the imamate could be confirmed, *kayfiyyat thoboot al-imama*," and the conditions under which political authority could be contested, *al-khorooj 'ala al-hakem*. Hanafi notes that there are two main theological positions with regard to identifying the political ruler. The first contends that the ruler can only be affirmed by a revealed text or *al-nass*, whether in the Qur'an or the prophetic injunctions in the *hadith*; this is the position historically held by the Shi'ite tradition (in ancient theological texts, the group who held this position is referred to as the *imamites* or *al-imamiyya*; v.5, 170).

The second position, which is generally held within the Sunni tradition (including both the Mu'tazalites and Ash'arites), considers "contract and choice, *al-'aqd wa al-ikhtiyar*" the primary way for a political leader to be chosen (v.5, 190). Hanafi adopts the Sunni contention that there is no "confirmed text" identifying the person or the attributes of the political ruler, noting that "should a text about a matter of such importance have existed, it would have been known to the majority of the Muslim nation through historical narration or *tawator*, as with the rest of religious matters" (173). For Hanafi this Sunni position and its Shi'ite counterpart are both products of the retrospective consecration of particular historical events (the contested rule of 'Ali ibn al-Taleb for the Shiites, the tradition of the four Guided Caliphs for the Sunnis), and do not represent a divine injunction (194). Rather, Hanafi's choice of the Sunni position is based on his

judgment that it is in line with the “intention” of revelation: “The principle of choice is an expression of reality, and the principle of contract a recognition of the common interest or *al-maslaha*. And since the revealed text is at its core an expression of reality (through the reasons for revelation or *asbab al-nozool*)<sup>102</sup> and a safeguard for the common interest (through the purposes of law or *maqased al-shari’a*)<sup>103</sup> the principle of ‘choice and contract’ is the one that converges the text” (193). Once again, Hanafi uses the “horizontal conception” of the relationship between revelation and reality to guide his reconstructive venture. In this case, identifying the political ruler through “choice” and inaugurating him as ruler through a “contract” represents the position that befits the ultimate purpose of revelation as “providing a guide for human life and the common interest” (v.1, 87). The reason he considers choice and contract to be in the better interest of the (Muslim) collectivity can be discerned in his reconstruction of the “criteria” according to which the ruler can be chosen, and of the conditions for his rule.

Hanafi divides the “specifications of the imam” in the Sunni tradition into three distinct categories. To begin with, the conditions that specify the ruler’s lineage can “be rejected because they are beyond the control of the human being and restrict the choice among available options” (239). The second category refers to “normal conditions” that indicate a set of historically derived norms, rather than an injunction of revelation or reason; these include that the ruler be male, free (i.e. not a slave), and adult (ibid). Hanafi considers these conditions either irrelevant to modern-day politics (e.g. freedom from slavery) or not binding in different historical circumstances (maleness). Hanafi identifies the third set of conditions as “obligatory or *wajiba*” in the sense that they rely upon the qualities of the person chosen as political ruler. These consist in “knowledge, justice, and resourcefulness” (247). “Knowledge,” Hanafi notes, does not refer to “inclusive knowledge of all religious matters, but knowledge necessary to rule the community,” such as knowledge of Islamic law and the capacity to interpret it in changing times and circumstances. “Justice” comprises “just adjudication of public matters, a divergence from which justifies revolt,” and a tacit dimension of “justice with oneself” that expresses itself in traits like “trustworthiness, honesty and chastity” (249). “Resourcefulness” consists in the ability to protect lands against aggression, and therefore necessitates courage as an additional attribute of the prospective leader (250). Here Hanafi reconstructs political leadership as appropriately based solely on merit and ability, rather than historical norms. Thus we can understand Hanafi’s contention about “choice” expressing revelation’s intent to provide what is most useful for the community of believers.

Hanafi’s conception of the qualifications for leadership relies upon the political subject’s ability to discern these attributes, to make a judgment about who best embodies them and what will serve the well-being of the collectivity. Hanafi’s explication and re-centering of the Mu’tazalite position on human will and judgment culminates in

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<sup>102</sup> For more on Hanafi’s understanding of “reasons of revelation” as evidence of the horizontal intentionality of the revealed text, see p. 17.

<sup>103</sup> The “purposes of Islamic law or *maqased al shari’a*,” is a concept devised by the 8th century jurist al-Shatibi. It conceives of Islamic law as concerned with protecting five main purposes: religion, life, reason, honor, wealth, to which Hanafi also adds “the human” as a sixth principle in which the other five culminate (p. 266).

grounding the political subject's ability to judge and choose political leadership accordingly. While Hanafi's discussion of the process through which a leader can be chosen offers little by way of orienting the subject towards the political, his conception of the modes through which the leader's performance could be monitored, rectified, and, if need be, contested and overthrown, provides an understanding of how the subject's orientation towards "the common" could be sustained beyond the process of "choice."

According to Hanafi, obedience to the leader is conditional upon a leader's own adherence to the "contract, '*aqd al bay'a*'" between him and the public. The conditionality of obedience to the ruler is based on the Sunni tradition's stipulation that "all subjects should obey their leader insofar as he does not violate divine law or *shar*" (266). Hanafi interprets the *shar*' to include "making just laws, abiding by the principles of Islamic law, [and] protecting the community against aggression" (ibid). He explains that "just laws" embody the purposes of *shari'a*, namely, the protection of religion, life, reason, honor, and wealth, to which Hanafi adds protecting the human, "who represents the locus of all these purposes" (ibid). The attunement to "the common interest" or *al-maslaha* and the vigilance to observe and assess the leader's performance are entailed in the Qur'anic injunction to "command the good and admonish the bad or the wrong," which, as we have seen, constitutes one of the main reasons for the divine's endowment of the human subject with reason and will in the first place. Where Hanafi's reconstructive effort is most observable, however, is in reinterpreting this generic command into a political obligation. He argues that "commanding the good and admonishing the bad constitutes the principle that animates the relationship between the masses and political authority" (256).

In addition to construing this principle as political in its capacity to "monitor and rectify political rule in accordance with its contractual premises" (266), Hanafi also understands "admonishing the wrong" to have an egalitarian content: namely, "reforming social conditions that have to do with the distribution of income and its inequality amongst the various social classes" (257). Indeed, persistent inability of the leader to reform his rule in response to the public's "advice" would necessitate revoking his rule altogether—it is a sign that he has broken the public contract (265). Hanafi's re-casting of this principle as essentially political provides the basis for the subject's continued attentiveness towards collective well-being, and provides a (broad) criterion for when such attentiveness should move from an advisory to a revolutionary stance.

Hanafi's political appropriation of the theological principle to "command the good and rebuke the bad" roots the subject's orientation towards the common good in his knowledge of the divine. But Hanafi's rendition of this principle as political is not his only such attempt. In fact, Hanafi's entire reconstruction of theology can be read as a gradual and sustained effort to transform his reader's understanding of theology, from one that conceives it as the realm of divinity and prophecy, to one that considers it a set of ideals and principles that guide and orient the human subject's approach to the social and political worlds, and that provides him with a vision of how his actions figure in the course of human history. Indeed, Hanafi conceives his reconstruction of theology as

beginning with monotheism, and culminating in revolution. It is only natural that theology has a political ending, and that monotheism gets embodied in revolution,

and God in the world, for political rule is the domain that connects theology to jurisprudence, and the conception of the world to its actual order. (137)

The foregoing interpretation of Hanafi's reconstruction of the theological principles of will, judgment, and political rule reveals how he attempts to root the political in the religious, and to use the religious to orient the subject towards the political. Hanafi's conception of the relationship between religious doctrine and politics is not "secular," in the sense that it understands the religious and the political as two distinct realms of human activity, requiring different rationales. However, when we recall that Hanafi conceives of theology as the (ancient) human subject's expression of the "ideal and actual human beings" and of "general and specific human histories," it becomes clear that Hanafi attempts to render theology immanent, rather than to render politics transcendent. Put slightly differently, what Hanafi's reconstruction of theology provides is not a religious reading of the political, but a secular reading of the religious. It is a conception of theology as the realm where the human subject expresses his yearnings for perfection, and reflects on his relationship to the divine. Put simply, theology is a historical narrative about the human interpretation of the divine, rather than the interpretation of the divine itself. Hanafi is invested in this reconstructed narrative because for him it remains the most important determinant of his contemporaries' constitution.

### **Conclusion:**

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that Hanafi's project should be understood as having a political-theoretical thrust. I have elaborated this thrust with: 1) an interpretation of Hanafi's deployment of the concept of *turath* to offer a critique of Arab ideology; 2) an analysis of his examination of the deep and persistent influence of *turath* on the constitution of Arab political subjectivity; and 3) the argument that his reconstruction of Islamic theology should be read as an attempt to restore the subject's political agency. Hanafi's concern with transforming Arab subjectivity originates with his understanding of the Arab predicament of continued "backwardness" as primarily a problem of Arab consciousness, whose sense of agency and history have been dampened by the dominance of a "binary conception of the world" that diverts energies away from the sphere of collective well being and towards the sphere of the divine. Hanafi's reconstructive project is, at its core, an attempt to restore the Arab subject's sense of agency-in-history, or of being the subject of history, through a reinterpretation of the constituent that he regards as most influential in that subject's constitution: the Arab-Islamic *turath*.

Hanafi's insistence on forging a connection between the Arab present and the Arab-Islamic cultural past is best understood as an attempt to justify his mobilization of a particular tradition to respond to present needs. In the spirit of the hermeneutic tradition in which he was trained, Hanafi believes that the human interpretive enterprise, which is at the heart of the subject's orientation towards the social and political worlds, is by definition located in past traditions, and uses these traditions to understand the world and to act upon it. Judging that the Arab-Islamic *turath* is probably the most influential interpretive tradition in the Arab context, Hanafi contends that the reinterpretation of

*turath* probably has the best chance of transforming the Arab subject's orientation to politics and society. The connection between Arab-Islamic *turath* and present-day Arab consciousness, tentatively argued as it is, serves as the justification for Hanafi's reconstruction of the Islamic disciplines, which is where he understands the thrust of his renewal to lie. By insisting that this connection is historical and definitive, however, Hanafi opens himself up to the risk of providing an essentialist understanding of Arab consciousness, viewing it as thoroughly formed by historical texts and as little changed since the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. Perhaps more importantly for the purposes of his project, by construing his Arab reader as a subject whose agency had been dormant for at least seven centuries, Hanafi presents himself with the daunting and implausible task of transforming a political subjectivity whose agency has long been suspended.

In contrast, Hanafi's contemporary and interlocutor Mohamed 'Abed al-Jabiri provides a well-argued account of *turath*'s continued influence on contemporary Arab ideology. Like Hanafi, Jabiri considers *turath* the main site for transforming the contemporary Arab subject. But Jabiri conceives of this transformation as possible only through a deconstruction, not a reconstruction, of *turath*—that is, subjecting its texts to a critical examination that situates them in their specific political, social, and cultural contexts, before attempting to mobilize them for present purposes.

## **Chapter IV:** **The Political Subject of *Arab Reason*: The Political Theoretical *Oeuvre* of Mohamed Abed al-Jabiri**

### **Introduction:**

Written in the 1980s and 1990s, Jabiri's works are animated by concerns similar to Hanafi's: namely, the polarization of Arab intellectuals between "secularism" and "salafism," and the failure of Arab thought to provide a vision for sociopolitical change, not least because of its fragmentation between these two ideological camps. Jabiri's writings are haunted by the problems of ideological polarization and, more significantly, by the continued "backwardness" of the Arab social, political, and cultural conditions. Like Laroui and Hanafi, Jabiri assigns intellectual activity a primary role in instituting political change, and, like them, he considers the key component of that activity to be an engagement with the Arab cultural past, *turath*, because of its constitutive influence on Arab subjectivity.

In a sense, Jabiri's oeuvre can be understood as an amalgam of Laroui's and Hanafi's respective projects. It is Larouian in the sense that it provides an account of the relationship between cultural and political change, offers a specific understanding of modernity in an Arab context, and engages in a sustained critique of contemporary Arab ideology to establish the reasons for its failure to produce a vision for change. But Jabiri's project is also Hanafian in that it conceives of Arab modernity as possible only through an engagement with *turath*: the linguistic, aesthetic, juristic, theological, and philosophical body of work that not only constitutes the Arab mode of knowing the world, but also defines what it means to be "Arab" (1994, 30). Jabiri's project differs from its counterparts, however, in that it aims neither to institute a rupture with *turath* nor to reconstruct it. Rather, Jabiri's project aims at producing an "alignment with" *turath*, that is, an engagement with *turath* that 1) situates its texts and histories in their social, political, and cultural contexts; 2) evaluates its underlying modes of knowing and acting upon the world in their own historical terms; and 3) identifies the components of the past that might act as "founding principles" to propel towards the future. In short, Jabiri is invested in an examination of the Arab subject that identifies the roots of Arab society's maladies, and the keys to its remedy, from within the Arab-Islamic historical trajectory. For Jabiri, historical change can only be produced from within one's history (and historical constitution), and invariably fails when imposed from without. It is in this sense that I argue that Jabiri's normative project dwells in his "deconstructive" examination of *turath*; where Jabiri's deconstruction could be understood as his classification of the Arab-Islamic tradition into different epistemologies which had either influenced the Arab subject in the past or could be mobilized to re-constitute him in the future.

Jabiri offers us a political theory comprising both critical and normative components. On the critical side, he provides a critique of Arab ideology, and a critique of the historical constitution of the Arab cultural and political subjects. On the normative side, he proposes a conceptualization of modernity as a historical and intellectual process, and an identification of the principles that could serve as its pillars within Arab-Islamic history. To explore this argument, the present chapter makes three crucial moves. First, it offers an analysis of Jabiri's account of the Arab predicament and his conception of



“Arab modernity.” Second, it provides an interpretation of his critique of Arab ideology, with its focus on the historical constitution of the Arab intellectual. Third, it performs an against-the-grain interpretation of Jabiri’s critiques of Arab theoretical and political reason. Jabiri conceives of these critiques as distinct, the former concerned with the constitution of Arab modes of knowing and producing knowledge about the world, and the latter with tracking the modes of attaining and practicing authority in Arab-Islamic political history. I argue that Jabiri’s account of the constitution of the political subject should also be read as an account of the mode with which that subject approaches the political world, specifically, of his conception of authority, legitimacy, responsibility, just rule, and his own political agency. My account provides specific historical examples of Jabiri’s political subject taken from his *Critique of Political Reason*.

As was the case with Laroui and Hanafi, there is a dearth of English-language accounts of Jabiri, and none of them treats his work as political theory. More significantly, none of the commentaries on Jabiri, in Arabic or in English, feature a holistic account of his project. Commentaries on Jabiri’s work tend to offer a stratified analysis of his work, whereby his theoretical writing is treated as a critique of Arab culture and part of the burgeoning genre of “*turath* and modernity,” while his political writings—his *Critique of Political Reason* and his essays on identity, secularism, and democracy—are considered to embody his political critique of Arab history and society. None of these engagements with Jabiri’s work offer an account of the connection between the two kinds of writing, not to mention an integrated account of them as a political theoretical project.<sup>104</sup> In contrast, my aim with this interpretation is to offer a holistic account of Jabiri’s corpus as a political-theoretical *oeuvre*, including a critique of the Arab political condition and of modes of thinking about that condition (Arab ideology), and a conception of how modernity can be brought about in an Arab context. It is to an examination of this political theory that we now turn.

## I. A Persistent Problematic:

What we encounter as the “historical backwardness or behindness” of Arab societies in Laroui and the “Arab crisis” in Hanafi, we see as “the problematic of al-*Nahda*”—the problematic of awakening or renaissance—in Jabiri. Like Laroui and Hanafi, Jabiri identifies the historical constitution of the “Arab human being” as the locus of this problematic, and therefore as that toward which the intellectual should direct his critical and transformative efforts.

The *Nahda* problematic is, Jabiri tells us, the multi-dimensional problematic that was first conceptualized during the Arab encounter with Western modernity in the mid-to late 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>105</sup> and whose thrust persists up until the present. Formulated as a

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<sup>104</sup> See for instance Abu Rabi’s (2004) account of Jabiri’s work in *Contemporary Arab Thought*, Jaafar Aksikas’ (2009) account in *Arab Modernities*, Nayla Abi-Nader’s (2008) account in *al-turath wa al-manhaj ‘inda Jabiri wa arkoun* (Turath and Method in Jabiri and Arkoun), Bierut: al-shabaka al-‘arabiyya, and Antwan Seif et al (2012) *al-‘aqlaniyya wa al-nahda fi mashroo’ muhamed ‘abed al-jabiri*, Beirut: markaz dirasat al-wehda al-‘arabiyya.

<sup>105</sup> Jabiri lists various possible beginnings for this “encounter” and the subsequent emergence of the “*Nahda*” as a problem and a discourse about that problem. These include the Napoleonic Campaign on Egypt and Syria (1798-91), Mohamed Ali’s attempt to establish modern European institutions (military,

question, the problematic of *al-Nahda* had historically been posed as: “why did we regress (the ‘we’ alternately referring to Arabs, Muslim, the East), while others progressed [the ‘other’ being Christian Europe, the West]? And accordingly, how could we rise or *nanhad*? How could we catch up with modern civilization?”<sup>106</sup> (1985, 35) Formulated as such, the question that 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers raised was meant less as an enquiry, and more as a “legislative and ideological question” (ibid). That is, it is a question that “seeks change and legislates for it in the context of a particular ideological vision” (ibid). In this case, as the *Nahda* question suggests, the direction of desired change was towards an “awakening” that would enable “catching up with the modern civilization” of the West.

Requisite for the achievement of *Nahda* or awakening was the implementation of social, economic, political, and cultural changes within an overarching framework that provided a vision for transforming each of these areas, while at the same time regarding each of them as a constituent of a larger whole, the *Nahda* itself. In Jabiri’s terms, the *Nahda* project presented modern Arab thinkers with a problematic because it featured “a set of relationships between several inter-connected problems within a particular body of thought that could not be tackled or resolved distinctly from one other, but that could only be resolved through a general solution that includes them all” (1980, 32). Jabiri refers to the set of concerns that preoccupied Arab thought during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as an instantiation of that problematic: during that time, “what preoccupied Arab thinkers was not a single problem, but a set of closely interrelated problems that could neither be analyzed nor resolved without reference to one other.” These included European colonialism, Turkish despotism, poverty, illiteracy, education, language (potential Turkification of the Ottoman provinces), and the inequality of women. Qassem Amine’s famous writings on the question of “women liberation” in the early 1900s, for example, could only be understood in such a context. Writing at the time, what was important for Amine, Jabiri notes, was not the liberation or education of women as an isolated question, but as a problem whose resolution was intimately related to other aspects of the *Nahda* project: namely, as Hanan Kholoussy (2010) reminds us, how better-educated mothers were a necessary precondition for producing a better-educated citizenry (particularly sons), who were capable of instituting sociopolitical change, and who provided compatible companions for a growing population of educated men.<sup>107</sup> Amine’s elaboration on the woman question, Jabiri concludes, required him to tackle attendant questions of education, democracy, and the role of tradition; in short, to discuss the problematic of *al-Nahda* as a whole (ibid).

But the problematic of *al-Nahda*, or overcoming Arab backwardness in relation to the West, did not find its resolution with colonial independence or with the establishment of the postcolonial nation-state. Indeed, it is the persistence of the *Nahda* problematic that

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industrial, social, etc.) in Egypt in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the onset of colonial settlement in the Arab East (1882 in Egypt).

<sup>106</sup> The question, posed by Jabiri, is a paraphrase of Shakib Arsalan’s (1869-1946) famous book title: *Why did the Muslims Regress while others Advanced?* Bayrut: dar maktabat al-haya.

<sup>107</sup> Qassem Amine formulated the question of women’s education as primarily related to producing a better-educated citizenry, and relatedly, of providing a population of “skilled partners” for an increasing number of “cultured men” in the Egyptian context. For a discussion of Amine’s views as they relate the broader context of his day See Hanan Kholoussy, 2010, *For Better or For Worse: the Marriage Crisis that made Modern Egypt*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 59-61.

accounts for Jabiri's conceptualization of modern and contemporary Arab thought as "Arab." Whether couched in the language of "revolution" (especially that of social justice, liberty, socialism, and unity) as deployed during the national liberation era of the 1950s and 1960s, or in the less radical reformist language of "*al-nahda*," more common since the 1970s,<sup>108</sup> he posits that what continues to be expressed is an underlying sentiment that "something in our *nahda* project [meaning the 19<sup>th</sup> century formulation] had not been accomplished," and that "despite the leaps that humanity had achieved in the various fields of life within the past century, the Arab share of these leaps has been significantly below their ambitions" when compared to the "dream" they had carved at the century's outset (1982, 5). That "missing something," Jabiri adds, was considered by some to lie in an economy which had failed to achieve the objective of industrialization, in the state's inability to provide basic social services or sustained solutions for problems of food, health, and housing, or to structure a cultural policy that universalizes education and encourages scientific innovation (ibid). Above all, this failure could be observed in the lack of economic and political integration amongst Arab states which the *nahda* project promised, which curtailed the chances of Arab progress in a world increasingly guided by integration (1994, 46). Jabiri's assertion is that, despite the problematic being at least a hundred years old, the present moment remains "a *nahda* moment par excellence" for Arab peoples (2004, 6).

The multi-faceted nature of the problematic notwithstanding, Jabiri, like Laroui and Hanafi, is particularly invested in the "cultural" dimension of the *Nahda* question. Moreover, like them, Jabiri is preoccupied with the decisive role that "Arab culture" plays in the formation of its subject, and in the role that "cultural activity" could play in transforming that subject. Already, then, we can discern the dual sense in which Jabiri uses the term "culture": the first usage refers to the substantive content entailed in the notion of Arabness (language, religion, a narrative about shared history)—that which defines what it is to be an Arab. To Jabiri, that sense of "culture," as we shall see shortly, refers to a lived tradition with roots in the historical past, which continues to constitute the present by shaping the way its subjects think and feel about their present, past, and future. The second mobilization of the term refers to the intellectual activity that should be applied to "Arab culture" or the culture of the past, by way of reconstituting the subjects of whom that culture was formative. The two senses of culture are indeed inter-related, at least in that "Arab culture" is itself conceived as a body of historical intellectual products whose spirit should be revived and emulated, but a close reading of Jabiri's arguments suggests that he deploys these two senses of the term to achieve different parts of his argument. Both usages are mobilized in the broader context of assessing the constitutive and re-constitutive influences of "culture" on the contemporary Arab subject.

In a book titled *The Question of Culture, al mas'ala al-thaqafiyya*, Jabiri indicates defines culture according to what he takes to be its specific Arab meaning. He points to the "organic linguistic" relationship between the word for "culture, *thaqafa*" and the word for "intellectual, *muthaqqaf*" in the Arabic language, in that they both share the

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<sup>108</sup> Jabiri's periodization of the usage of "revolution" and "*nahda*" maps onto the shift in Arab (especially Egyptian) economic and political policies towards more economic deregulation and a pro-Western political orientation, as opposed to the state socialist, non-aligned character the Egyptian state had adopted during Nasser's time, esp. the mid 1950s till the late 1960s.

same root, *th-q-f*. What Jabiri draws our attention to here is that the understanding of the intellectual as, literally, the “bearer of culture” has certain implications as to how “culture” itself is used within modern Arab discourse. Specifically, it relies upon the processes and products of intellectual activity and not on folklore, rituals (religious or otherwise), or more generally to quotidian practices, which Jabiri identifies with the “view of Western anthropology” of the notion of culture (1994, 18). Understood this way, he adds, the word “culture” as it is used in the contemporary Arabic language refers to “thought” both as “intellectual content and the tools that are used to produce that content,” that is, as the exercise of the intellect itself (ibid).<sup>109</sup> Jabiri’s definition of “thought” comprises the two senses of culture outlined above. Thought or culture is both, intellectual content (produced in the Arab past) as well as the tools used to produce that content (intellectual activity itself).

Jabiri uses the sense of culture as intellectual activity to refer approvingly to 19<sup>th</sup> century Arab thinkers’ conceptualization of the role of intellectual engagement as primary to the process of *Nahda*. As with Laroui and Hanafi, the thrust of Jabiri’s argument about these early thinkers emphasizes the centrality of cultural transformation to social and political change in the context of developing societies, and more specifically, societies of the Arab world. In his *Contemporary Arab Discourse*, Jabiri (1982) identifies the late 19<sup>th</sup> century understanding of the sequence with which *al-Nahda* should be implemented to be a correct one, because it gave priority to intellectual transformation. In that context, he notes that Arab thinkers of the time had conceptualized “intellectual awakening, not merely as a manifestation of the desired sociopolitical change, but as a necessary condition for the achievement of such change” (1982, 6). This is why, he adds, these thinkers saw the universalization of education, the dissemination of (modern) knowledge, and the “deployment of ‘reason’ to fight myth, superstition, and fatalism” as preconditions for the attainment of social, political, or economic change (7).

In other words, Jabiri conceives of the roles of intellectual activity and of the intellectual vanguard as key to conceptualizing and leading sociopolitical change. . . a conception which we had previously encountered in Laroui and Hanafi, and which is closely identified with the understanding of socialism during the national liberation struggles and subsequent state-building ideologies in the 1950s and 1960s (the “generation” with which Jabiri himself identifies (1982, 5)). We will recall from Laroui’s exposition that intellectual activity assumes particular significance in the context of developing societies because of the always-already character of the “future” in the imagination of Third World and particularly (post)colonial peoples. This character, which Laroui describes as developing in the “anterior future” tense, is produced in those societies by their self-understanding as “backward” in comparison to the West, and, at the

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<sup>109</sup> Laroui writes what could be considered a diatribe against Western anthropological understandings of “culture” as folklore and ritual, and more specifically, of the “Arab youth” who have come to hold this understanding. The implication is that Arab society had historically produced a “culture” (i.e. a set of linguistic, aesthetic, philosophical, jurisprudential, in short intellectual, products etc.) that cannot be compared to a Western anthropological delineation of “culture” within “tribal” or “primitive” communities. For Laroui, this is not only a matter of the mischaracterization of Arab culture; it comes in the broader context of the late-modern West’s attempt to give credence to all cultures because of the “identity crisis” that befell its sense of self after WWII. This “internal healing mechanism” that the West used for its own purposes had insidious and regressive effects when applied to the Arab context in Laroui’s estimate, and should therefore be shunned and condemned by Arab intellectuals (1973, 62-86).

same time, as not having developed the historical conditions required for overcoming that “backwardness.” Effecting “leaps in history” thus becomes the only mode through which such societies can progress. In that context, intellectual activity plays a key role in conceptualizing the possibilities of such “leaps” and in preparing the grounds for them.

Jabiri adds more nuance to this conception by positing that the transformative role of intellectual activity can only take place when a certain level of social change has also taken place, as in the socioeconomic changes brought into the Arab east by colonialism, for instance. Indeed, this change is what causes the indigenous intellectual to construct his condition as “backward” in the first place. A preliminary historical change is at once necessary for the indigenous intellectual to reflect on his condition, and also indeterminate, in the sense of its future possibilities. Intellectual activity could then be understood as an intervention in the historical space opened up by this indeterminacy. It is perhaps in this sense that we can understand Jabiri’s assertion about the crucial role of intellectual activity in charting the way for future development, and potentially leading it (through, Laroui would posit, shaping public opinion or influencing political leadership).<sup>110</sup>

This intellectual activity assumes its importance to *Nahda* precisely because of the transformation it tries to effect in the Arab subject; in order for such intellectual activity to bear fruit, it must engage with the primary constituent of Arab consciousness, with “Arab culture,” this time understood as “a cultural, intellectual, religious, literary, and aesthetic heritage” (1992, 22). Understood as a cultural heritage, Arab culture is constitutive of the manner in which the Arab “reads, knows, dreams, thinks, and judges” the social and political worlds (1982, 6). This understanding of culture as formative is precisely what makes intellectual activity—in its capacity to criticize of extant modes of understanding the world (mythical, superstitious, fatalistic) and to creatively craft new ones (rational, scientific)—a precondition for social and political change in the societies of the Third World.

It is in this vein that we find Jabiri arguing in a later work that “the [culture of the] past constitutes a pivotal factor in the problematic of present Arab consciousness, and it is only naïve to neglect it, or to hope to achieve modernity by bypassing it” (1994, 30). It is also in this context that we can understand Jabiri’s earlier argument about how laying a cultural and intellectual foundation for democracy (understood as a political process) is key to achieving it, exactly because “the Arab human being had not yet achieved the necessary rupture with pre-modern modes of thinking about politics,” and therefore, that only a process of cultural change—that is, a change in his constitution via intellectual

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<sup>110</sup> In the context of describing the specific iteration of socialism that pervaded the Arab world during and after the wars of independence, Anouar Abdel-Malek (1983) writes: “Socialism has quite a different meaning in Europe and North America: their very existence as a nation is not at stake. In the Arab countries, on the other hand, an accelerating social, political, and economic renaissance, as well as the advance of socialism throughout the world, have polarized matters and placed socialism right at the heart of *nationalitarian* processes... socialism thus has a very specific character in Arab countries” (4). Abdel-Malek goes on to imply that, in the context of Arab socialism, a movement for the revival and critique of “national culture” was key among the concerns of the intellectual and political elite of the time, “in the efforts to animate a national renaissance rooted in the popular classes” and because of the realization (especially among Arab Marxists) that “only by being fully itself can a nation become a full member of the international community” (ibid). For more on conceptions of the role of the intellectual in Arab countries, see Mohamed Bamyeh’s (2012) *Intellectuals and Civil Society in the Middle East*. London: IB Tauris.

engagement—could cultivate the “will-to-democracy, *iradat al-demokratiyya*” needed to initiate democratic transformation ([1994] 2004, 97).<sup>111</sup> For Jabiri as for Hanafi, the protracted predicament of the Arab social and political condition is closely entwined with the role “Arab culture” plays in the formation of Arab political subjectivity; in this case, in influencing the manner in which the Arab political subject adjudicates legitimate authority and identifies the common good.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, as we shall see later in this chapter, Jabiri’s entire project can be read as precisely such an attempt to lay the foundations for a future *Nahda* through understanding (and transforming) the role that the “past” plays in the constitution of the present.

The constitutive effect of Arab culture on its subject is not only negative, however. It also represents the condition of possibility for one of the main objectives of the *nahda* project, in its early and late iterations: namely, a greater measure of Arab unity. In that vein, Jabiri observes that, since their political independence in the 1950s and 1960s, there had always been a “persistent tendency towards unity” amongst the Arab peoples, despite being divided into different nation-states, each with its own sociopolitical trajectory, and despite the ethnic diversity of their populations. The reason for the persistence of this “tendency,” he argues, is that people across these countries share a singular culture, “Arab culture,” comprising a shared “language, religion, past, and future ambitions” (1994, 25). Put slightly differently, Jabiri claims that the persistence of the tendency towards Arab unity amongst Arab peoples is generated by what makes them “Arabs” in the first place: namely, their historical constitution by, and affective affinity to, the same body of linguistic, religious, intellectual, and aesthetic productions, and the attendant epistemologies and histories that this corpus comprises. Importantly, Jabiri does not deny the existence and significance of different subcultures and historical trajectories within the broader context of the “Arab nation,” or *al-watan al-‘arabi* as he often refers to it. What he suggests is that these peculiarities exist alongside a notion of a shared past that runs parallel to these various individual trajectories and a persistent visualization of the future as common, both of which can only be explained if we consider the formative role that Arab cultural heritage has historically played across these subcultures, and their ability to inhabit that heritage as their own<sup>113</sup>. Conceived this way, the commonality of Arab culture among the various subcultures in the Arab world

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<sup>111</sup> It is important to note that Jabiri views this cultural transformation as key to jumpstarting the democratic process in Arab societies through creating the will-to-democracy, but not necessarily to sustaining that process or resolving the problems it will invariably generate. He crucially argues that only democratic practice can help to resolve the problems that democracy may lead to (2004, 106).

<sup>112</sup> It is important to note here that Jabiri is not making an argument about the “political immaturity” of Arab peoples or their lack of readiness for democracy, an argument often made by contemporary political leaders whom he squarely criticizes. What Jabiri is saying is that many of the arguments for democracy in the Arab world since the early 1980s have been more concerned with short-term goals (ousting a particular ruler or party, overcoming the authority of a particular tribe) than with long-term commitment to a set of political practices and ideals. It is towards the entrenchment of that set of ideals that Arab culture should thus be directed (1994, 102-3).

<sup>113</sup> Jabiri adds more nuance to this idea by employing the concept of “the temporality of Arab culture,” by which he means the historical time whose intellectual productions continue to define the entirety of the Arab cultural heritage, and whose modes of conceiving the world retain their influence on the way modern-day Arabs conceive themselves (Jabiri identifies this time as the Age of Codification, mid 9<sup>th</sup>-mid 10<sup>th</sup> century AD (1984, 45)). For a more detailed discussion of the “temporality of Arab culture,” see the section on Critique of Arab Reason in this chapter.

provides a favorable condition for achieving a greater measure of unity (economic and political) across these countries precisely because that culture continues to play a constitutive role in shaping the way inhabitants of these countries conceive of themselves, their history, their present condition, and their future.

Jabiri argues that any future attempt to mobilize the “tendency to unity” among inhabitants of the Arab world into a political reality would involve “empowering and developing the [unifying] role that Arab culture had historically played” (1994, 26). The common constitution of members of Arab countries provides a solid potential for their unification, but this potential requires intellectual labor to develop it into a real possibility through “re-constituting the consciousness of unity,” its premises and its entailments, on the part of Arab societies (29). In its turn, this “re-constitution” requires a “rearrangement of our relationship with the [cultural] past, in order to plan for the culture of the future” (ibid). Rearranging the relationship with the cultural past is key, because it represents a “pivotal element in the problematic of contemporary Arab consciousness,” that had impeded that consciousness from developing. As with other elements of the *nahda* project, then, intellectual activity emerges as key in effecting sociopolitical change (towards unity in this context) through transforming the “consciousness” of the Arab subject<sup>114</sup>

But how, precisely, does Jabiri interpret the Arab cultural past? And what are the specific ways in which that past could be intellectually engaged in order to produce the desired transformation in consciousness and reality? More importantly for our purposes, how could we situate Jabiri’s intellectual endeavor to critique Arab reason using his own conception of the modernizing role of intellectual activity? To answer these questions, we turn to an examination of Jabiri’s conception of modernity.

### ***The Nahda Mechanism: Containing the Past***

What I have been referring to as the “culture of the past” in Jabiri’s discussion of the *nahda* problematic is what we had previously encountered as *turath* or the Arab-Islamic heritage in Hanafi’s works. Indeed, Jabiri uses the language of “Arab culture” and *turath* interchangeably when referring to the constitutive influence of the Arab-

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<sup>114</sup> Note here that Jabiri is giving us a very particular depiction of the objectives of the projects of *Nahda* and *thawra* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively, as aspiring to the ideal of Arab unity. The historical record on both of these projects speaks differently, however. It is, for example, common knowledge among Arab (and Western) historians that there were several contending traditions within each of these movements, most prominently those who advocated for an “Arab unity” (first against the Ottoman empire, then against Western colonial and imperial interests), those who were interested in Islamic unity (primarily against Western colonialism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), and those who advocated a narrower modality of nationalism (Syrian nationalism of the *Baath* Party, for instance). For more on these variations, see Hourani, A. (1983), *Arab Thought in the Liberal Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. And Kerr, M. (1965), *The Arab Cold War*. London: Oxford University Press. Jabiri is cognizant of these nuances, as his study on *Identity* indicates. In the context of his discussion of the constitutive role of Arab culture on its subjects, however, he adopts the overarching argument that Arab unity had been the a salient objective within the *nahda* and *thawra* projects, and that it remains the aspiration of the majority of Arab peoples in the present (1985, 33). This, of course, betrays Jabiri’s own investment in that project, given his affiliation with the nationalist socialist movement in Morocco during independence and post-independence times. For more on Jabiri’s political and ideological background, see the introduction to this dissertation.

Islamic cultural heritage on the contemporary Arab subject, in that it is both what makes that subject “Arab,” and what has a decisive influence on the way he experiences reality. But Jabiri also provides us with an explicit definition of *turath*, one that is clearer and more nuanced than that offered by in Laroui or Hanafi. The reason for this clarity, I suggest, is the crucial role the notion of *turath* plays in Jabiri’s theorization of an “Arab modernity” and of how it could be achieved. Namely, Jabiri conceives of *turath* as the potential source of the principles that could be mobilized to achieve modernity or *nahda* (awakening). However, such mobilization of *turath* had historically been curtailed by colonialism. Jabiri’s account of Arab modernity can therefore only be understood through his narrative about the Arab failure to institute it.

I have already hinted at some of the key aspects of Jabiri’s understanding of *turath* in the forgoing discussion, including his consideration of Arab culture as constitutive of the modern-day subject’s mode of knowing his social and political worlds and in shaping the direction of his “dreams” about its future. Jabiri succinctly defines *turath* as “the epistemological and ideological entailments, and the rational bases and the affective charge, of Arab Islamic culture [as it is experienced in the present]” ([1991] 2006, 24). Expressed more simply, Jabiri explains that *turath* cannot be properly understood if it is considered as the remnants of a cultural past in the present, or a “heritage” in the traditional sense; rather, it should be understood as the continued and “living presence” of that past in the “consciousness (*waii*) and inner worlds (*nufus*)” of present day Arabs (ibid). Accordingly, the contemporary Arab understands *turath* not to be the history of his culture, but the kernel and completed form of that culture; for him, “it is theology and law, *shari’a*, language and literature, reason and mentality, nostalgia and future outlook” (ibid). For the contemporary “Arab self” or *al-dhat al ‘arabiyya*, *turath* is a lived tradition that shapes the way that subject knows the world, understands its present condition, constructs its past, and conceives of its future possibilities. Defined this way, Jabiri’s formulation of *turath* is reminiscent of Hanafi’s understanding of *turath* as a “live presence in the consciousness of the masses” (1992, 13), and of Laroui’s definition of traditionalism as a way of understanding history that underlies the subject’s definition of himself, his present condition and his future prospects (1973, 29).

Unlike Hanafi, however, Jabiri does not consider this understanding of *turath* to be either intuitive or ahistorical. Rather, much in the manner of Laroui, Jabiri is attuned to the way *turath* conveys the historically specific “content” of Arab culture, and the ideological and affective investment in that content on the part of the Arab subject. Jabiri observes that Arab thinkers tend to deploy *turath* in their respective delineations of the Arab future. Specifically, Arab ideologies tend to identify the direction of future change as either a move towards or away from *turath*, in the meantime imbuing *turath* itself with a content that justifies their argument (as, for example, when various thinkers refer to the relationship between religion and state in Islamic history as one of separation or fusion to make arguments about how that relationship should manifest in the present). Jabiri understands the affective charge of *turath* to emanate from its identity-producing role, as we have seen in the earlier discussion on Arab unity: the Arab cultural past is perceived as what makes one Arab, and is therefore invested with affective attachments to what constitutes one’s own identity, particularly when faced with an external threat.

Jabiri provides us with a tentative genealogy of this usage of *turath* that dates back to the thinkers of the Arab *Nahda* in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The specific usage



of *turath* as a lived tradition invested with ideological and emotional charge is, Jabiri tells us, unprecedented in Arab-Islamic intellectual history, or in the languages from which modern Arab thought has borrowed much of its conceptual apparatus (namely English and French). In both these languages, he adds, the notion of “heritage” is used either literally, to indicate the actual inheritance left by the dead to their kin, or metaphorically, to refer to “beliefs and habits of a particular civilization, in short, its ‘spiritual heritage’” (22). Similarly, ancient Arab usages of the term have usually referred to “the money and/or status a person inherits from their dead parents” (22). None of the Arab-Islamic disciplines have used the term to refer to an “intellectual heritage” that continues to live in the present, and in none of these lexicons, Jabiri notes, do we find the thick understanding of *turath* as “a cultural, intellectual, religious, literary, and aesthetic heritage wrapped in an affective and ideological attachment” that we find in its present usage. The place where this specific usage should be sought, Jabiri concludes, is modern Arab thought itself. That is to say, a proper understanding of *turath* must contextualize it within the concerns of modern Arab thought (late 19<sup>th</sup> century through WWII) and the kinds of claims that corpus sought to make through its mobilization of the term.

Jabiri argues that the notion of *turath* was summoned by the thinkers of the Arab *Nahda* to play a dual role: modernizing and defensive. Both uses are intimately connected to the colonial context within which that modern Arab thought emerged. Like Laroui, Jabiri suggests that the onset of Western colonial expansion in the Arab world generated a profound concern within that world about the “backwardness” of the Arab (and Ottoman) condition in relation to their Western colonizers. This concern initiated a quest for critiquing the present and the immediate past through “returning” to the more distant past in search for a set of principles that could be mobilized to overcome the present problematic condition. This mobilization of *turath* featured a revival of the cultural past that “reduced [it] to a set of ‘fundaments’ or *usul* that were revived on the level of consciousness in order to enable it to transcend the past and present and be propelled into the future” (1985, 40). This forward-looking deployment of *turath* is what Jabiri refers to as the “*nahda*-oriented or *nahdawi* mechanism.” It is the “mechanism” that he considers to underlie both the first Islamic *nahda*, culminating in the conquest of Mecca and the expansion of the Islamic empire, and the processes of Renaissance and Religious Reformation that featured the early beginnings of Western modernity. In both these cases, Jabiri adds, the “distant past” is reread by the sociopolitical forces representing the “new” in a way that “interprets that past as embodying the principles that these forces strive for, and that make the present appear as though a deviation from those founding principles, such that this present condition is then understood to become a culprit, not only in the name of the [problematic] future [it is conceived to lead to], but in the name of the past as well” (36).<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> One example of such usage could be found in Laroui’s depiction of how Muhammad ‘Abduh (the cleric) “returned” to the textual sources of Islam to find in them solutions for the problems of freedom and democracy, for whose absence the Islamic world was incessantly critiqued by its Western colonizer. Here, the issue is not whether ‘Abduh’s interpretation practice of *shura* or counsel in early Islamic history was historically accurate. Rather, the issue is how ‘Abduh’s reconfiguration of *shura* to include some of the connotations of Western notions of democracy and liberty sought to address a perceived problem in the present and the immediate past (Ottoman despotism) by “returning” to *turath* and recalling it as a tradition that could speak to contemporary concerns and rectify them ([1967] 1995, pp. 39-42).

It is in this vein that we can understand Jabiri's definition of "modernity" in his later work as primarily a "method or *manhaj*" as well as a particular "vision or *ru'ya*" ([1991], 2004, 16). That is to say, modernity cannot be understood as merely a set of concepts (a certain understanding of rationality, liberty, equality, religion, etc.), but also as a method through which such concepts are endowed with "new" meanings. To Jabiri, this method necessarily involves a return to the "past," the specific past of the group in question (the Abrahamic past for Muhammad, and the Greco-Roman past for the Renaissance), not to emulate it, but to use it to authenticate the premises on which the prospective future is to be based, and, crucially, to inculcate a transformation in the consciousness of subjects who identify with that past. Re-arranging the relationship between the past, present, and future through a return to, and reinterpretation of, the past, or what Jabiri refers to as "the alignment with one's *turath*, *al-intizam fi al-turath*" is thus the key to the transcendence of the present.

Alignment with one's *turath* should be understood not only as a reinterpretation and remobilization of select "foundations" from *turath*, but also as the critical re-examination requisite to instituting such reinterpretation. This "critical alignment" with *turath* requires understanding the specific historical context within which it was produced in order to effectively invoke it in critiquing the present condition. Understood this way, "alignment with one's *turath*" as a precondition for instituting *nahda* assumes its credibility in Jabiri's narrative not just through the power of historical precedent (early Islam and Western modernity), but also because it assumes a logical relationship between one's present and past. According to this relationship, the present condition can only be understood and overcome through an examination of indigenous history and culture (*turath*) that tries to produce a "movement in the present condition through submitting it to an immanent critique, a critique that comes from within its historical tradition" (2006, 16). It is in that sense that Jabiri speaks of modernity as necessarily plural: that is, he invokes "modernities" that should be understood as "historical processes" particular to their time, place, and specific historical context (ibid).

Jabiri's definition of modernity should not be understood as assuming an unproblematic continuity between the present and the past of the kind we encountered in Hanafi. To be sure, Jabiri conceives of the relationship between these two temporalities to be constructed retrospectively, as part of the process of "critical alignment." Such, for instance, is the account he gives of the way European modernity had constructed its history and organized it retrospectively on a progressive scale, each stage leading to the next. However, Jabiri also seems to imply that, despite its retrospectively constructed nature, there is a certain level of commonality or historical continuity, however tentative, required for the process of alignment between the "consciousness of the present" and the consciousness of the past.<sup>116</sup> What made the process of critical alignment possible in the European case is the absence of an "external threat" during the process of alignment with, transcendence of, and retrospective construction of "modern" European history. Such, however, was not the case with "modern" Arab history.

The inability of the Arab *Nahda* to fulfill its "*nahda*-oriented or *nahdawi*" potential should, Jabiri argues, be understood as an effect of colonial intervention. The

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<sup>116</sup> In the case of the Arab-Islamic *turath*, as we shall see in the following section, Jabiri provides an elaborate argument for the sense of continuity that the contemporary Arab subject experiences with his cultural past.

transformation of a culture, and through it of the consciousness it forms, cannot, Jabiri explains, be instituted by the imposition of a foreign culture that “exists outside of the history of the local culture, and could therefore not engage that culture in a way that mobilizes change from within its confines”(16). What such imposition does, in fact, is to institute a defensive reaction of “recoil and self-enclosure,” and not a forward motion of transcendence (ibid). This is why Jabiri rejects Laroui’s position of calling for a “rupture with *turath*” as a way of instituting modernity; indeed, it is precisely this defensive response to the imposition of Western culture through colonialism that curtailed the modernizing thrust of the Arab *Nahda* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In that context, *turath* was mobilized as a reinterpretation of a set of historical principles to overcome the state of “backwardness” of which Arab thinkers were now aware, and as a “resort for the self through which it could assert its existence and unique personality” vis a vis *its colonizer* (1985, 40).

This “defensive” deployment of *turath* existed in tension with its *nahdawi* counterpart because of two inter-related features of the colonial experience: first, the non-indigenous “origin” of the Arab *Nahda*, in that it was initially an intellectual movement stirred by the “shock of Western capitalist expansion” (41). In contrast to the early Islamic and European *nahdas*, Jabiri argues the Arab *Nahda* was not the expression of a rising socioeconomic force that sought to contend with the extant socioeconomic structure by posing as representative of the founding principles of the (superior) cultural past. Rather, it was a modernizing movement whose social and economic bases were as yet rudimentary and “still in their nascence,” and whose onset was artificially prompted by an external force (41). Jabiri’s thus ascribes to the intellectual movement of the Arab *Nahda* a certain fragility. In his estimate, it lacked the “infrastructural” bases (social class, a certain level of socioeconomic development) that could provide a stable buttress for its efforts, and was therefore susceptible to the confusion and ambivalence caused by colonial intervention. This, Jabiri implies, would have not been the case had this movement gradually and organically sprung from its own environment.<sup>117</sup>

The main source of confusion for *Nahda* thinkers was the dual character of the colonizer, who was regarded as both “an enemy” to be resisted and a “model” to be emulated. There was, on the one hand, the “West of aggression and colonial expansion” and, on the other, the “West of progress and liberal values,” a duality that, Jabiri notes, continues to haunt Arab thought in the present (57).<sup>118</sup> This dual character of the

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<sup>117</sup> It is worth noting that, despite his earlier emphasis on the priority of “cultural change” through intellectual activity, Jabiri considers the lack of sufficient socioeconomic development in the context of Arab *Nahda* as one of the reasons why this discourse was not firmly rooted in its milieu. This implies Jabiri’s belief that a certain level of socioeconomic development is required in order for cultural change to emerge in the first place (this “level” was, presumably, caused by colonial exploitative intervention). Once such a cultural movement emerges, it shapes a vision for the future that, in its turn, should influence the direction of social and political change. This is why Jabiri refers to the relationship between cultural and socioeconomic change as “dialectic” in one of his works, and it could be seen as one more layer of complexity he adds to the discussion of the relationship between intellectual development and social, economic and political change.

<sup>118</sup> This experience of the colonizer as both enemy and model is, of course, not unique to Arab thinkers. Consider, for instance, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s comment on how African writers continue to deploy the language of their colonizer as they ask for independence from colonial and neo-colonial rule. In his *Decolonizing the Mind*, Wa Thiong’o writes: “Even at their most radical and pro-African position, in their

colonizer, and later of the “West,” resulted in the simultaneous deployment of two “mechanisms” of engaging *turath*, the modernizing and the defensive: one through which to access and revive the cultural past as a basis for an Arab modernity, and the other with which to protect the “Arab self” from the threat of distortion and annihilation by securing a repository of identity to be preserved. Each discourse operated in a different register, the *nahdawi* to contain and move-beyond, the defensive to revere and glorify. In the defensive register, *turath* is invested with the emotional charge of identity, as well as the ideological charge of representing a “model” upon which the future could be erected.

If we read Jabiri’s argument through Laroui’s lens, we gain an even more nuanced understanding of the “confusion” caused by the dual character of the colonizer for the colonized. The dual mobilization of *turath*, Laroui would comment, did not (necessarily) express itself through different thinkers or ideological discourses; rather, it was often expressed through a single thinker and within the same ideological discourse. Laroui’s depiction of Muhammed ‘Abduh’s (the cleric’s) thought serves as a good example of such confusion. ‘Abduh sought to mobilize *turath* by returning to the primary origins of the Islamic faith as he understood them—the Qur’an and the prophetic tradition—in order to effect a critique of the present condition of the Ottoman Empire, thus using *turath* in what Jabiri would have characterized as a “*nahdawi* or modernizing mechanism.” But ‘Abduh’s move, as Laroui understands it, was also “defensive,” in that it sought to defend Islamic faith against western claims of its irrationality and despotism. It invoked *turath* to provide “authentic” definitions for “freedom” and “reason” that imbued them with liberal understandings of these terms (freedom as the absence of despotism, and reason as the opposite of superstition and myth). Indeed, Jabiri hints at a similar understanding of the early salafism of ‘Abduh and Afhani when he refers to their salafism as a “polemical ideology that justified itself as a way of asserting the self [i.e., that was used defensively] and that was intended as part of a broader project of effecting a leap forward [or producing a *nahda*]” (2004, 17). The net result of this confused deployment of *turath* was far from a “leap,” however. It was part of what Jabiri refers to as the “movement in place” of Arab thought since the *Nahda* (1982, 42).<sup>119</sup>

This “movement in place” is best exemplified by the endurance of the binaries “modernity versus tradition” and “authenticity versus contemporaneity” in Arab thought since the Arab *Nahda* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both these binaries, Jabiri notes, are symptoms of the Arab *Nahda*’s failure to fulfill the potential of its modernizing or *nahdawi* component and, therefore, to both align itself with and transcend *turath*. Had such transcendence occurred, *turath* and “authenticity” (typically associated with the defensive deployment of the Arab-Islamic heritage) would have ceased to present themselves as the diametrical opposites of modernity and “contemporaneity” in a world dominated by modern Western thought. The continued use of *turath* to defend the self as

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sentiments and articulation of problems they [African intellectuals] still took it as axiomatic that the renaissance of African cultures lay in the languages of Europe” (1997, 5).

<sup>119</sup> Jabiri adds to this intellectual and emotional sense of “confusion” another form of confusion, emanating from the effects of colonialism on class dynamics. He notes that colonialism expanded the definition of “class conflict” beyond the conflict between the traditional class (feudalists, etc.) and the forces for change, to include the conflict between representatives of the “Arab-Islamic self” (who shunned colonial rule but were not invested in effecting socioeconomic change) and of the “other” (who initially thought of alliance with the colonial West as an effective way to overcome Ottoman despotism and, with it, its underlying socioeconomic structure) (1994, 36-44).

well as propel it forward is at the heart of the emergence and persistence of such binaries, which Jabiri implies are artificial intellectual constructs with their genesis in the confusion introduced by colonial intervention. This culminates in the “existence of a certain anxiety and confusion in our [Arab intellectuals’] minds in the relationship between the past and the future, *turath* and contemporary thought, the self and the other” (1985, 41).

Like Laroui and Hanafi, Jabiri too undoes the *turath*/authenticity-modernity/contemporaneity binary in modern Arab thought. Laroui, we will recall, does so by reminding us of the colonial “origins” of modern Arab thought and the enduring influence of that origin on its formulations, while Hanafi does it by defining authenticity as a dynamic relationship between text (revelation) and context that Arab ideology has hitherto failed to achieve. In a manner more akin to Laroui than Hanafi, Jabiri undoes the binary by historicizing its origins in the contending usages of *turath* in modern Arab thought and the inhibiting influence of these usages on that thought’s development. Whereas Laroui historicizes the authenticity/modernity binary to dethrone assumptions about the “authenticity” of modern-day *salafism* as well as to explain *salafism*’s failure to institute social and political change, Jabiri historicizes it to underscore what he considers to be productive and unproductive ways of interpreting *turath*, as well as to account for the failure of the *Nahda* thinkers to bring about the *nahda*. In so doing, he, like Hanafi, mobilizes the notion of *turath* to offer a preliminary critique of Arab thought, as well as a vision of how a “correct” engagement with *turath*, one that is both critical and inclusive, is key to the achievement of a modernity that is specifically Arab.

Before moving to an analysis of Jabiri’s account of *turath*, it is crucial to briefly explore his response to two interrelated questions: first, how do Arab ideologies that do *not* take the Arab-Islamic heritage as their referent (liberalism, Marxism, etc.) figure in Jabiri’s analysis of modern Arab thought? Second, why did Arab thought since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century continue to be a “movement in place”? Examining Jabiri’s response to these questions illuminates a key component of his political theory—his critique of Arab ideology—and serves as an important preface to his own reading of *turath*.

## II. Arab Ideology: of Being Contained by the Past

Jabiri understands all Arab ideologies to be underlain by an epistemological act that finds its roots in the Arab-Islamic heritage, and that he analyzes at length in his *Critique*. Indeed, Jabiri’s narrative could be understood as positing colonial and neo-colonial Western expansion as the “objective” condition for the stagnation of Arab thought, and the “intellectual act” on which that thought is based as the “subjective” reason for that stagnation. Colonial intervention, we will recall, impeded the modernizing thrust of Arab thought because it generated a continuous tension between modernizing and defensive deployments of *turath*, and between the selective revival of *turath* as a pillar for a new future form, and the construal of *turath* as a dwelling shielding the self from external threat. This hesitation persists insofar as the West continues to be regarded as both a “model” and an “enemy,” a contradiction that Jabiri contends still frames the

conception of the West in present-day Arab thought.<sup>120</sup> Ultimately, the standstill produced by the tension between the defensive and *nahdawi* mobilizations of *turath* has resulted in the entrapment of Arab thought in artificial binaries (*turath* and modernity, authenticity and contemporaneity), and the subsequent inability of that thought to provide a workable vision for sociopolitical change, much less to implement it. The persistence of the modular-inimical specter of the West explains modern Arab thought's failure to adequately theorize *nahda*, but only in part: a more profound reason for that failure can be found by tracking the "epistemological act," *al-fi'l al ma'rifi*, underlying all currents of modern Arab ideology, and unveiling the deeply problematic way that these currents have hitherto approached the questions of *turath* and its relationship to instituting *nahda*.

Jabiri reads the three major currents of Arab thought of salafism, liberalism, and Marxism as posing three different kinds of questions about the appropriate relationship between *turath* and the prospective future. As formulated by Jabiri, each of these questions points in the direction of the "correct" response, and could thus be understood as having an ideological investment in *turath*. The "correct" response to each of these questions frames each ideology's reading of the Arab-Islamic *turath*, thereby providing a rendition of that *turath* that befits the purpose that it is meant to play within the broader scheme of the ideological discourse in question.

Jabiri argues that the question that had guided *salafi* thought since the Arab *Nahda* is: "how can we restore the glory of our civilization? How can we revive our *turath*?" ([1980] 2006, 16) Formulated this way, the primary concern with *turath* is in deploying it to bring about a future that embodies its ideals. Jabiri identifies the notion of *turath* animating this discourse specifically as a return to the "sources" (the Quran and prophetic tradition) and the ways of the *salaf as-saleh*, the righteous predecessors, of early Islam and prior to the Great Upheaval, or *fitna* (656 AD) (1982, 36). This call for "renewal or *tajdid*" should thus be understood as a call both for rejecting the emulative tradition or *taqlid* that pervaded the "regressive ages or '*asr al inhitat*'" in Islamic history, and for "constructing a new understanding of religion through returning to the sources of Islam" to guide the future ([1980] 2006, 17).

Jabiri contends, however, that this "return to the sources" is strictly polemical in nature. It consists not in engaging in a rigorous reinterpretation of the religious sources, taking into consideration their linguistic and historical specificity, but in the "projection of the image of the 'desired future' onto the 'past' and the subsequent deployment of that [constructed] past to demonstrate that "what had once been done, could be repeated in the future"" (1980, 17). The polemic is directed towards the colonial and neo-colonial West (and, by implication, to ideological rivals who call for Westernization as a modality for progress). The objective is to "preserve identity, authenticity, and hold on to one's roots, all of which are understood to consist in Islam; the 'true Islam' of the *salaf*, not that of

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<sup>120</sup> It is worth noting that Jabiri is not alone in making this argument about the enduring presence of the West as a model/enemy for Arab thought (and for the Arab subject more generally). Writing in 2009, the German-based Syrian philosopher Burhan Ghalioun writes, "[For the Arab] the world today remains as it had been for the past century, a symbol of Western hegemony. To him, this hegemony remains enchanting and horrific, salvaging and destructive. The Arab stands before it fearful and captivated...and so he keeps oscillating between total submission and total rejection, between self-flagellation and self-aggrandizement, between denial and reverence of the other, unable to reject that other, and unwilling to assimilate with it" (32). For more on Ghalioun's formulation see, *Ightiyal al-'aql (Assassination of Reason)*, Casablanca: al-markaz al-thaqafi al-'arabi.

contemporary Muslims” (ibid). Modern-day variations on that theme, what Jabiri calls liberalized *salafism*, applaud liberal notions of “science, freedom, democracy, and intellectual creativity” but endow them with an Arab genealogy, positing that “if these concepts happen to be European in the present, their past goes back in our Arab and, more generally, Eastern, pasts” (1982, 40).

For Jabiri as for Laroui, the *salafi* invokes a *turath* infused with the concerns of the present, to perform what Laroui calls a “conciliatory act” (1995, 41) that restores balance to the colonized (and neo-colonized) self and “fortifies that self with the confidence it needs to face its condition” (Jabiri, 2006, 17). In what could be thought of as a Larouian move, Jabiri adds that the conceptual apparatus that salafism deploys to understand and unravel the problems of the present itself belongs to the past, and is therefore unable to comprehend the present. In that vein, Jabiri gives the example of how Muhamed ‘Abduh’s understanding of “reason” was very much in the tradition of the Ash’arite rendition of that concept: namely, “reason as what enables its subject to attain the realization of the existence of the one God and the verity of prophethood, and that, having done that, then resigns itself [to following God’s commands as delivered revelation]” (1982, 35). ‘Abduh then uses this conception of reason, different as it is from its modernist counterpart, to address the challenges of Arab condition in the wake of colonialism<sup>121</sup>. Jabiri understands salafism to feature an ahistorical conception of *turath* in that it imbues the historical corpus and concepts of *turath* (the religious texts, the ideas and practices of the prophet and the early Muslims) with the problems of the present, and then projects that corpus as the solution to these problems (subjugation, humiliation, “backwardness”). In doing so, the salafi is not attuned to the radical difference between his conceptual apparatus and that of the “modern condition” in which he exists, thereby his consistent failure to grasp and introduce changes to that condition.

This construction of *turath* as a glorified past is justifiable and legitimate insofar as it is a requirement to defend the self and resist its colonization, and a prelude to enabling that self to “leap forward” into the *nahda*. The problem with modern-day *salafism*, however, is that this “defensive deployment” of *turath*, initially carved by the early salafism of Afghani and ‘Abduh in colonial times, had itself become the “*nahda* project” for the modern-day *salafi* (16). Put slightly differently, the self-fortifying *salafi* understanding of *turath* whose purpose was to assert the self against its colonizer ended up itself becoming the end for which that self strove. For the modern-day *salafi*, *turath* was no longer only a discourse mobilized to protect the self against an existential threat; it was also a set of social and political arrangements (which the salafi conceives as inherent to *turath*) that should be actualized in the present. Refusing to see the *salafi* mobilization of *turath* as one possible path for overcoming the Arab predicament, Jabiri condemns it as a regressive understanding of the cultural past more concerned with the preservation of the self than with propelling it forward.

The persistence of this defensive usage of *turath* is understood by Jabiri as an effect of the “mental act” through which the *salafi* produces his narrative about *turath*. In Jabiri’s foregoing discussion of the Arab *Nahda*, for instance, the present and immediate

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<sup>121</sup> Jabiri quotes Imam abu Hamed al-Ghazali (1058-1128), the Ash’arite jurispudent and philosopher, to define reason in this context as “the faculty which restrains [*ya’qil*] its subject from engaging in wrongdoing” (Jabiri, 1982, 36). For a different understanding of ‘Abduh’s reading of reason see, Euben (1999), *Enemy in the Mirror*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

past are both understood as ages of emulative tradition, which ought to be overcome by a renewal that returns to the original sources of the faith. In this formulation, the present and future are rendered accessible and meaningful through a historical narrative about the fall from an ideal and a return to it, proposing a vision for the future (the unknown) that analogizes it to the glorious past (the known). In this context, we could perhaps think of the emergence from the age of *taqlid* to the age of *tajdid* as we would the emergence from the age of *Jahiliyya* to that of Islam. *Jahiliyya* featured the blind emulation of a monotheism that had been distorted by successive generations of religious practice and ultimately strayed from its origin in Abrahamic faith, and *taqlid* features the blind emulation of the problematic methods and ideas of the dark ages of Islamic history. Salvation in the present, as in the past, should be sought through a “return to origins”: just as the Islamic message of Muhammad returned to its Abrahamic origin, *tajdid* involves a return to the origin of the Islamic message by returning to the sources of the faith. The “epistemological act” through which the *salafi* knows his present and his future is that of analogizing them to (his conception of) the past. This deployment of analogy to understand the present and visualize the future is, Jabiri contends, characteristic of both liberal and Marxist understandings of the Arab predicament. More crucially, it also constitutes a feature of the epistemological modality that reigns supreme in Islamic history: “*qiyas al-gha’eb ‘ala al shahed*” or analogizing the present to the absent.

Based on Jabiri’s earlier exposition of the *nahda* mechanism of deploying *turath*, one could counter-argue that salafism’s ideological interpretation of *turath*, which invests it with solutions to present problems, could serve to propel the self towards a future where such problems could be resolved based on the “founding principles” of *turath*. Indeed, Jabiri gives the example of the Qur’an’s “return” to the Abrahamic faith to edify its monotheistic claims and institute the Islamic *nahda* in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. Jabiri’s response to this counter-argument would probably be that salafism does not regard *turath* as a set of principles to deploy, assimilate, and then move beyond, but as an “origin” towards which one should return. Jabiri’s reading of the Qur’an’s deployment of the founding principles of monotheism as laid by Abraham provides one such example: Islam’s new universal modality of faith and worship featured a “containment of the past, now condensed into one moment, that of the Abrahamic message,” and then a movement beyond this moment into a new and different future (1985, 38). “The *salafi* reading of *turath*,” by contrast, “does not contain *turath*, but is contained by it” (17). There is a crucial difference, Jabiri would argue, between a movement into the past that distills it into a set of premises on which the future can be constructed, and a movement into the past that wishes to return to it *per se*.

Yet, if this “origin” to which the *salafi* wishes to return is only a “construction” based on the predicaments of the present, perhaps a movement towards it is a kind of move towards the future. However, Jabiri would argue, the *salafi* still operates within the conceptual and epistemological framework of the Islamic medieval past, using the concepts of reason, nature, and freedom that prevailed in that past and that are no longer adequate for understanding the present. According to this view, salafism would not be defined by the *salafi*’s wish to return to the past; rather, it would be defined by his way of knowing the world, and the concepts he uses to describe it, both of which belong to the historical past of *turath* according to Jabiri’s scheme. There thus seems to be at least two



ways in which the “past” is being deployed in Jabiri’s thought: that of the *salafi* and that of Jabiri.

Jabiri’s delineation of the *salafi*’s reading of the past as “ideological” and “ahistorical” can be better understood if we discern the way Jabiri uses “history” in the context of his ideological critique. According to him, a proper historical reading is one that reads historical texts (and the ideas and events that they feature) as a product of their own historical time. This “history” is thus a secular one, in the sense that it provides a reading of historical ideas, practices, and events as products of human action (within particular contexts) through which the future unfolds in homogenous time. Viewed from this perspective, salafism would be ahistorical because, as Jabiri tells us, it invokes a “religious understanding of history as a perpetual presence in one’s being and affect, a presence that attests to the self’s perpetual suffering and struggle to avail itself and assert it...and in which the spiritual factor is considered the sole source of the self, and therefore, the true motor of history” (ibid). Such an understanding of history as a perpetual presence in one’s being is in striking contrast to the understanding of history as a discrete past, a unit of time that is distinct from the present and the future but that is also “equal” to them in its contribution to history. The temporality of salafism, in which the present is understood as a “fall from the past” and the future as a “return” to that past, contrasts with the temporality of modernity, or of the *nahda* in Jabiri’s lexicon, in which history is by definition a “forward” movement whose relationship to the past is one of “transcendence.” The weight of that past is determined by its constitutive effect on the subject of history, and the extent to which this effect can be “contained and moved beyond” (ibid).

The understanding of history as a series of distinct stages (past, present, and future), each of which calls for a different interpretation of the historical past (*turath* in this context), also explains Jabiri’s understanding of the “use and abuse of history” in Arab ideology. Jabiri implies that the defensive deployment of *turath* is legitimate within certain contexts (e.g. colonial times), but illegitimate in others (e.g. the present). It is legitimate insofar as it animates the response of the colonized subject to an existential threat, but is not when responding to a threat by recurring to the past becomes the *modus operandi* of that subject after that threat had passed. Different historical stages require different orientations to, and deployments of, the historical past.

These deployments occur within a broader conception of history as a series of stages through which the subject of history passes, but through which he can also take “leaps” forward by “aligning himself with the founding principles” of the past (interpreted in such a way as to render its principals amenable to the forward thrust of “history”). This understanding of history is, of course, reminiscent of Laroui’s “historicism,” which conceives of history as a series of stages that can only unfold through human action, and that, in the case of “backward” or third world contexts, require a “leap” on the part of the historical agent in order to be “compressed” and ultimately become contemporaneous to one’s context (as shaped by Western modernity). This understanding of history is teleological in the sense that it comprises a set of stages through which the subject of history moves, but it is not the *telos* of the *salafi* history, wherein the divine wills history to move in the “right” direction when the faithful return to the true edicts of their faith; for Jabiri, it is a more open-ended teleology, determined solely by the actions of its subject. Jabiri’s depiction of the *turath* of the *salafi* as

regressive can thus only be understood in the broader context of his understanding of history as a forward movement. It is within this framework that Jabiri understands the liberal and the Marxist as *salafis*: the “righteous predecessors” whom the liberal and Marxist follows are not those of the Arab Islamic heritage, however. They lay in the Western past.

The question that the liberal asks of himself is “how could we become present to our times? How shall we treat our *turath*?” (18) The question for the liberal is thus how to become contemporaneous to the spirit of the present, and how *turath* can be understood from the perspective of that present. The “present” to which the liberal refers is not the Arab present, however. Jabiri notes that it is the present of the European West, which imposes itself as the “subject of the entire age and for the whole of humanity, and, accordingly, as the ‘basis’ for every conceivable future” (ibid). This Arab liberal thus assigns a trajectory for Arab history that mirrors that of the liberal West, giving the Arab present the status of the West before it had “substituted scientific knowledge for inherited tradition” (1982, 36). Accordingly, the liberal adopts the orientalist reading of *turath*, which, per Jabiri, reduces the historical presence and significance of the Arab-Islamic heritage to the role it played in transcribing Greek civilization. The “future” of the Arab past consisted in the assimilation and absorption of the non-Arab past. Analogously, the liberal concludes, the “future” of the Arab is conditioned upon his absorption and assimilation of the modern European past.

Despite differences in their characterizations of the Arab liberal’s relationship to *turath*, both Laroui and Jabiri agree on that figure’s identification of the history of European modernity as *history per se*. Whereas Laroui implies that the Arab liberal attempts to affirm *turath* by glorifying the historical “Arab” (the Bedouin) as a free being whose nature was transformed by oppressive Ottoman rule, Jabiri sees the liberal construing *turath* as the historical success of Arabs who effectively managed to assimilate the knowledge of the ancient West. This difference aside, both thinkers concur that the liberal understands both ancient and “modern” Arab histories as instantiations of “moments” that had already been experienced in the European past. For the liberal, Arab history can only be rendered comprehensible and meaningful if accessed through the lens of their presumed counterpart in the European past. It is in that vein that Laroui presents us with the Arab liberal’s self-understanding as that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Western liberal, while Jabiri talks of the Arab liberal’s view of *nahda* as contingent upon the adoption of the “mental constructs” of the modern European present-past.<sup>122</sup> Like *salafism*, the liberal reading of *turath* (and of Arab history more generally) is ahistorical. It does not read history on its own terms or within its own context, but reads it through its supposed *telos* as presented by the trajectory of the modern West. This view also lacks an understanding of the specific problems of the present Arab condition, of its peculiarities, and of the specificity of its historical trajectory. Additionally, as with his *salafi* counterpart, the Arab liberal’s movement between *turath* and the present, and between the Arab present and its constructed counterpart in the Western past, is guided by the “mental act” of analogy: first between the Arab past (as understood by orientalism) and the Arab present, and then between the Arab present (the European past) and the future (the European present).

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<sup>122</sup> Jabiri uses the phrase “present-past” to connote that the Arab liberal understands his present to be the past of his modern European counterpart.

Jabiri understands Arab Marxism's reading of *turath* is haunted by a problem similar to that of Arab liberalism. For the Arab Marxist, the question that frames the proper understanding of *turath* is: "How do we achieve our revolution? How do we reconstruct our *turath*?" (19) The two "variables" in this question, revolution and *turath*, exist in a co-constitutive relationship between two prospective projects: "the project of a yet-to-be revolution, and the project of a *turath* that ought to be reconstructed such that it plays the appropriate role in founding the revolution" (ibid). Jabiri calls this relationship "dialectical," but it could be better understood as a tautology: "the revolution is required to reconstruct *turath*, and *turath* is required to help achieve the revolution." The contemporary Arab left, Jabiri remarks, is "lost in this vicious circle always trying to find a 'method' to exit" (ibid). At the heart of the Arab Marxist predicament is that, like their liberal counterparts, they consider the "stages" of European history, and the dynamic underlying the movement from one stage to another, as representative of historical movement as such. When Arab-Islamic history fails to lend itself to this reading, the exasperated Marxist blames "the unwritten Arab history" or the peculiar complexity of Arab history. As with the Arab liberal, the Arab Marxist in Jabiri's view is unable to grasp the specificity of Arab history, understand the Arab present, or develop a vision for the Arab future, because it assumes a historical referentiality outside of that history. The repeated failure of the analogy is, Jabiri contends, the reason for the ultimate failure of the Arab left either to provide an insightful reading of Arab-Islamic history or to achieve its revolution.

Indeed, Jabiri's claim could be viewed as a critique of Laroui's proposal to "Arabize Marxism," which, in part, calls for the reading of Arab history through a Marxist framework to unravel some the puzzles that remain unexplained in that trajectory. Jabiri would probably argue that such a reading imposes a conceptual apparatus borrowed from the analysis of European history onto the distinct history of Islam, at least in the pre-colonial age. As we shall see, Jabiri deploys a variety of post-Marxist concepts in his own reading of Arab-Islamic history, yet he emphasizes that he selects from the Marxist tradition the concepts that befit the historical material at hand, rather than imposing a particular conceptual framework upon them. For Jabiri, the Arab Marxist applies Marxist methods to Arab history "to demonstrate the verity of his method," not to understand that history.

Salafism, liberalism and Marxism are all underlain by an epistemological method that generates knowledge about the present and the future by analogizing them to the Arab-Islamic or European past. This mode of reasoning is, Jabiri notes, characteristic of the method historically used by Islamic theology and jurisprudence, and in the Arab language and its various disciplines before that. The roots of Arab ideology's deployment of this method can thus be found in the historical constitution of the Arab intellectual-subject, informed by organized and semi-organized forms of educational instruction (schools, colleges, religious schools, etc.). The ahistorical conceptions of the Arab present and prospective future hitherto produced by the three main currents of Arab thought find their roots in the deployment of this method, in which the present can only be accessed and the future visualized through a "return" to the "past." The intention of this return is not to understand the historical constitution of the present or its historical trajectory—that is, to ask the question, "How did we get here from there?" Rather, it is directed at understanding the present moment *by* identifying a moment in past that is

analogous to the present, and consequently, that helps chart a route for the future. In Jabiri's estimate, this curtails an understanding of the present on its own terms, as a moment in a broader historical trajectory, constituted by continuous and dynamic change in the interplay between specific social, political, and cultural factors. In the case of the liberal and the Marxist, analogizing the Arab-Islamic *turath* to the European past distorts the historicity of *turath*; as for the *salafi*, it is the impulse to glorify *turath* that distorts its historicity.

Jabiri understands the problems of the analogical method to be further compounded by the abuse of that method during the emulative or *taqlid* era of Islamic history (around 1400 AD onward). In the heyday of Islamic knowledge, Jabiri tells us, the analogical method was rigorously applied in the various Islamic disciplines, whereby any analogy would be preceded by establishing whether the two elements to be analogized (linguistic, jurisprudential, theological) were of the same character, and whether they shared a particular element that was constitutive of both their characters. However, during the age of *taqlid*, these conditions were increasingly neglected, and the "loose and cavalier application of the analogical method became the norm" (21). Accordingly, modern-day Arab thinkers are not only heirs to an ahistorical method, but to a version of that method that has been widely distorted through centuries of irrigorous application. Based on Jabiri's account of the use of this method in Islamic history, one could add that it had not initially been devised to examine historical events or to produce knowledge about history. Rather, it was mostly employed to issue juristic judgments on issues for which there was no textual reference in the Qur'an and no precedent in the prophet's sayings or deeds, or to understand the world of divinity through analogizing it to the human world.

Jabiri also critiques Arab ideology for its lack of "objectivity" in reading *turath*. The *salafi*, liberal, and Marxist readings of *turath* all try to fit it into a preconceived narrative of historical development. The investment of each of these readings in producing a particular rendition of *turath*, Jabiri implies, prevents them from examining *turath* as it *really* was, as a product of its own history with its own trajectory. Though Jabiri does not identify the reason for this lack of objectivity in Arab ideology, one could refer to his earlier contention about the impact of colonialism to gain some insight. The *salafi* reading of *turath*, we will recall, is viewed by Jabiri as an effect of the perceived threat colonialism posed to Arab identity. In that vein, one can understand liberalism and Marxism as different kinds of responses to colonialism: namely, responses that sought to adopt the concepts and theoretical frameworks to which the Arab intelligentsia was increasingly exposed to understand the present and devise ways out of it. The insufficient "Arabization" of these theories, to use Laroui's term, can be understood in the urgency these thinkers, like the *salafi*, felt to produce a narrative about the present and future. For both groups, however, the persistence of the inability to understand *turath* on its own terms (i.e. to produce a "historical" and "objective" understanding of *turath*) could itself be explained by the "epistemological act" that underlies Arab intellectual activity—namely, the analogical method.

Jabiri presents himself with the task of devising an approach to *turath* that remedies the ills of the readings offered by the various ideological currents of Arab thought. The ultimate aim of Jabiri's account of *turath* should not be understood as merely issuing a corrective to extant interpretations, however. Rather, Jabiri regards the

problems of Arab ideology as symptomatic of a deeper malady, namely, the constitution of “Arab reason” itself. Jabiri presents himself the task of conducting a critical examination of the historical constitution of Arab reason, the mode with which Arabs have historically known and produced knowledge about the world, in order to then “break the structure underlying these problematic ways of reasoning.” Jabiri’s prospective account of *turath* should also be understood in the context of his earlier exposition of the *nahda* mechanism: his *Critique of Arab Reason* can be read as an attempt to produce a *nahda*-oriented rendition of *turath*, that is, to deconstruct *turath* in order to find within its confines the elements that could be mobilized as “founding principles” for the forthcoming *nahda*, or as Jabiri often puts it, for instituting a “new Age of Codification,” that parallels the age of Arab cultural flourishing (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) in Arab history (1985, 58).<sup>123</sup> To do so, however, he first has to devise a mode of approaching *turath* that could overcome the problems of ahistoricity and lack of objectivity that have hitherto plagued Arab thought.

### ***Jabiri’s Method: Transforming the Subject of Ideology into a Subject of Knowledge***

Jabiri’s formulation of the proper approach to *turath* should be understood not only as a methodological prelude to a scholarly examination, but as an attempt to transform the subject of ideology—who had hitherto approached *turath* with preconceived notions—into a subject of knowledge, who can assume a critical distance and examine *turath* on its own terms. This implies an overcoming, or at least a momentary suspension, of the “Arab reader’s” dual investment in *turath*: his constitution via *turath*, and his ideological investment in it. *Turath* is constitutive of the Arab subject in the sense that it “frames the way he thinks about his world” (26); he “receives *turath* since his birth as words and concepts, language and thought, knowledge and fact, fables and myths, and as a mode for approaching things around him” (ibid). He is also invested in *turath* as a means of resolving the ills of the present. “Burdened by his present condition,” the Arab reader “finds in *turath* what responds to his present needs and hopes, reading into it notions of ‘science,’ ‘rationality,’ and ‘progress’ that he yearns for” (ibid). But in so doing, that reader “tears apart the unity of the text, distorting its meaning, and taking it outside its proper historical and epistemological realms” (ibid).

Jabiri thus aims at providing a heuristic method through which the Arab reader, be he the scholar or the “average intellectual,” could distance himself from *turath* in order to gain an understanding of its texts, thinkers, events and attendant ideas and practices on their own terms.<sup>124</sup> This distancing would be followed by a re-appropriation of *turath* in a new form and with new relationships. Jabiri identifies the first step of this process as “separating the subject from the object,” or of distancing the reader from his investment in the text at hand. Jabiri describes a structuralist mode of reading, whereby “the meaning of the text should be excavated from the text itself” by viewing the text as a set of

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<sup>123</sup> For an elaborate definition of the Age of Codification, see the section Arabness as Temporality, p. 46.

<sup>124</sup> The “Arab reader” in this context connotes both the Arab intellectual as well as the broader Arab public. At the outset of his *al-turath wa al-hadatha* (Turath and Modernity), Jabiri (2004) indicates that the intended audience of his studies of *turath* is not only limited to intellectual community, but also to students (primarily college students) who want to learn about *turath* (6).

relationships between signifiers, which must be examined closely in order to find their meanings.

Having attained a critical distance from the text, the reader moves on to “separating the object from the subject,” that is, to considering the text on its own historical terms, not as a projection of its reader’s present problems or hopes. Jabiri refers to the first step as the “structuralist treatment” of the *turath*, meaning a consideration of a historical figure’s body of writing as a structure that is animated by a particular problematic, “such that every idea that thinker proposes could find its natural place within this totality.” This is done by establishing—or, more accurately, reconstructing—the connections between the thinker’s texts, and being attuned to his rhetorical strategies and intended audiences. This structuralist step is then supplemented by a historical analysis, whereby a thinker’s work is embedded in its historical context, with its attendant “political, social, cultural and ideological dimensions...in order to attain a historical understanding of that corpus and to discern the ideological function it is meant to play in its specific context” (27-8).

This dual process can be understood as an attempt to establish a critical distance between the Arab reader and *turath*, in which the subject has a determinative ideological investment. This critical distance is to be attained through multiple processes, all aimed at reading the texts and figures of *turath* as products of their own time and space, and as interlocutors in a particular historical problematic. Only through thus rendering *turath* present to itself can it be made present to us, in the sense of becoming both comprehensible (as an intervention in a historically-situated problematic) and relevant (by allowing us to empathize with the problematic in which the work was situated). It is with such critical distance that Jabiri enters his *Critique of Arab Reason*.

### III. Critique of Arab Reason

Jabiri’s *Critique of Arab Reason* is divided into three distinct parts. The first two, the *Formation* (1984) and *Structure* (1986) of Arab reason, traces the epistemologies of knowing and producing knowledge about the world throughout Arab cultural history. He refers to this part of the project as a study of “Arab theoretical reason,” as opposed to Arab political and ethical reason. This part of Jabiri’s project should be understood as a study of the specific ways that Arab culture (i.e., historical intellectual activity in the fields of language, religion, and philosophy) has constituted its subject in the past, and continues to do so in the present. To distinguish this part of the critique, I will refer to it as the critique of Arab theoretical reason, and to the subject it forms as the subject of Arab culture. My examination of the first two volumes of the *Critique* will show that Jabiri’s critique of Arab culture also entails a critique of Arab politics.

Jabiri’s project also examines the way Arab political history since the rise of Islam (7<sup>th</sup> century AD) has formed the Arab subject’s approach to politics and ethics<sup>125</sup>. My examination of Jabiri’s critique of politics offers an interpretation of his historical

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<sup>125</sup> My current examination intends to cover Jabiri’s historical examination of Arab culture and politics, and omit his examination of ethics, as the latter is in large part a reflection of his critique of politics. It uses the same texts and concepts that appeared in the critique of political reason, to study the impact of political history on the subject of Arab ethics. As such, it adds little to my current investigation into the implications of Jabiri’s *Critique* for his understanding of politics and political subjectivity.

analysis, and reads his two critiques alongside one another in order to illustrate the interconnections between culture and epistemology on one hand, and politics on the other, in a way that neither Jabiri nor any of the extant studies of his work have done before.

### **Critique of Arab Theoretical Reason:**

The foundational texts associated with Arab-Islamic culture in the fields of language, theology, jurisprudence, aesthetics, and philosophy are generally understood to have been produced between the 8<sup>nd</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Jabiri's examination of *turath* could be read as a study of these texts, though that is not its primary intention. Rather, as we have seen, Jabiri's engagement with *turath* is part of a broader project of analyzing the underlying reasons for the failure of Arab thought to produce the theoretical foundations needed to guide the processes of social and political change in Arab societies since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jabiri's *Critique of Arab Reason* should thus be seen as an investigation into this failure, and, more importantly, as an attempt to "rewrite Arab-Islamic history" in a manner that could "reconstitute our [Arab] past as a heritage which we contain rather than that contains us" (1985, 50).<sup>126</sup>

Reconstituting the past as heritage does not imply rendering it bygone or obsolete, however. Rather, as we will recall from Jabiri's earlier exposition of modernity, a critical re-examination of the collective past is the only way to a genuine and progressive movement within the present. Specifically, this *nahdawi* (awakening) or modernizing movement is the potential result of identifying and mobilizing a set of inherited "foundational principles" that can propel the subject towards the *nahda*—the transcendence of the past and the establishment of a future that is new but also *of* that past. Jabiri's examination of Arab-Islamic cultural heritage should, I suggest, be read as an attempt at such a mobilization.

Accordingly, Jabiri's critique of Arab cultural reason offers more than just an analysis of the historical constitution of the subject of Arab culture; it is also a normative political theoretical exercise. Jabiri's historical examination of *turath* identifies particular moments, texts, and historical figures as potential sources for "founding principles" or *usul* that can be used to initiate the process of *nahda* and to transform the mode with which the Arab subject conceives the world and produces knowledge about it. The political theory of Jabiri's *Critique of Arab Reason* should thus be sought in the implications of the critical and normative components of his analysis for the subject's orientation to politics: to authority, legitimacy, liberty, political agency—in short, its implications for Arab political subjectivity. Before examining Jabiri's political theory in the *Critique*, it is first important to understand his idea of "Arab reason."

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<sup>126</sup> Jabiri considers such a rewriting of Arab-Islamic history a necessity, given the extant accounts of that history, which he describe as either "lousy repetitions of the selfsame history written by our ancestors under the conceptual and political constraints of their historical context," or histories that treat the components of Arab cultural history (aesthetic, religious, linguistic, etc.) as disparate components with no holistic view of their interconnections; their relationship to the broader social, political and civilizational context of which these components were part; or of their development over time (1985, 51).

### *Arabness as Temporality, Reason as Culture:*

Whereas Laroui and Hanafi both seem to rely on their readers' intuitive understanding of the terms "Arab" and "Arab-Islamic," Jabiri provides a specific definition of what he means by the "Arabness" in Arab culture or reason. He also specifies what he means by "reason" in a manner reminiscent of Hanafi's extensive definition of his particular usage of "consciousness." More significantly, Jabiri defines these two terms by historically situating both "Arabness" and "reason" in the Arab-Islamic register. In doing so, Jabiri produces a less reified conception of "Arab reason" than we have encountered in Laroui's and Hanafi's respective deployments of "Arab consciousness."

The two terms in Jabiri's "Arab reason" can only be understood with reference to one another. Jabiri defines reason as "a tool for producing knowledge that is constituted by a specific culture" (1984, 13). The relationship between "reason" and "culture" is thus co-constitutive: reason produces knowledge, which includes culture, and is itself formed through the process of knowledge-production. "Arab reason" is thus "the reason that had been formed through its production of Arab culture" (14). It is "the sum of the principles and premises that Arab culture provides to its members as a mode of attaining and producing knowledge" (15). This does not imply that reason, once produced by a particular culture, stagnates. It has the capacity to develop itself, and to institute a "new reason" that replaces the old by engaging in a "self-critique that unveils its bases and enriches it with new concepts adapted from other realms of human thought" (17). In short, reason for Jabiri is a capacity for knowing and producing knowledge about the world that is specific to a particular culture, and that is capable of inducing change within itself (and, as a consequence, within the culture of which it is part) through a process of self-critique.

Besides being culture-specific, Jabiri's notion of "reason" is not restricted to the conscious dimension of human experience. Indeed, Jabiri understands the cultural specificity of reason to be a result of the deep embeddedness of "culture" within the unconscious of the subject. To capture the unconscious dimension of the subject's reason, Jabiri uses Piaget's concept of "cognitive unconscious," which in the context of Jabiri's discussion of Arab reason, connotes the "set of concepts, conceptions, and intellectual activities that determine the Arab human being's –i.e. the person who belongs to Arab culture– conception of the world, the human, society, history, etc." (40). These concepts and conceptions are "unconscious" because they "direct, in an unconscious way, the intellectual and ethical orientations of those who belong to Arab culture, and shape the way they understand themselves and others" (41). Thus, Jabiri's understanding of "reason" is more proximate to the notion of "subjectivity" than to a Kantian or Cartesian understanding. Reason for Jabiri is not the autonomous and self-conscious experience or exercise of judgment on the world, rather, it comprises a process of knowing and engaging with the natural and human worlds that is deeply embedded in a specific context, and in which that context constitutes one's unconscious modes of knowing the world. Clearly, Jabiri's deployment of "unconscious" in this context differs from the Freudian psychoanalytic sense of the term, whereby the unconscious is understood to host, among other things, a set of universally shared desires and libidinal energies. Jabiri's "cognitive unconscious" is neither universal, nor libidinal; it is specific to a



particular group (those constituted through Arab culture) and pertains to their mode of knowing the world, not to their modes of experiencing desire. What it shares with its psychoanalytic counterpart is its non-conscious dimension. That is, the subject of Arab culture does not consciously employ the concepts or modes of knowing the world in question; rather these concepts and modes constitute part of that subject's epistemological and social (political and ethical) being. There is also another rationale for Jabiri's use of the "unconscious" in his definition of Arab reason, however. The experience of time in the unconscious is key to his formulation of "the temporality of Arab culture."

At the outset of the *Critique*, Jabiri defines Arab culture as "the culture that features the general history of Arab civilization and expresses the lived reality of its members and their future ambitions. It is also a reflection of the reasons for their current state of backwardness or *takhalluf*" (14). It is, in other words, the combination of the two senses of culture we had seen Jabiri use in an earlier discussion. Specifically, it is an amalgam of the 'culture of the past' or *turath*, and culture as contemporary intellectual activity that expresses the problems of lived reality (social, economic, political, etc.) as well as formulates a peoples' future ambitions. But there is an additional sense of culture to which this definition refers and which is not reflected in either of the previous senses of culture. It is culture as reflective of the reasons for "Arab backwardness." This sense is best captured if we refer to Jabiri's consequent characterization of Arab culture as featuring a "temporality" or *al-zaman al-thaqafi* (literally 'cultural time') that is not governed by the movement of regular historical time. Specifically, since Arab reason finds its "concepts, conceptions, and intellectual activities" in the "cognitive unconscious," it follows that the temporality of that reason is not governed by historical time, for "there is no history in the unconscious, which it does not submit to the dictates of 'normal' time" (40). Instead, Jabiri argues that "cultural time" in which Arab reason dwells is that of the Age of Codification, '*asr al-tadween* (mid 9<sup>th</sup> to mid 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD), the period in which "the general edifice of Arab culture was laid, and that still represents the major reference point for Arab thought until the present" (43)<sup>127</sup>.

Jabiri's argument that this early period of historical development still determines cultural time is twofold. First, he argues that this historical period witnessed the compilation and documentation of the works of two preceding historical periods, commonly considered formative of Arab culture: the pre-Islamic age of *jahiliyya* and the early Islamic period. Indeed, Jabiri posits that it was during the age of codification that the *jahiliyya* was constructed as a cultural origin of Arab culture (its language and poetry), a periodization which still holds today. Second, Jabiri points out that the texts and figures that appeared during these periods are still considered major references for the key fields of Arab culture in the present (grammar, theology, jurisprudence, Shiite theology and jurisprudence, translations of Greek philosophy into Arabic, etc.) Based on this framing of Arab culture and its temporality, Jabiri now defines "Arab reason" as:

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<sup>127</sup> It is worth noting that, at this point of his analysis, Jabiri introduces what could be understood as a 'mediating concept,' "cognitive unconscious" (originally Piaget's) which in the Arab case connotes the "set of concepts that determine the Arab human being's conception of the universe, society, history, etc." (40). Jabiri uses this concept (which is really another iteration of the concept of "Arab reason") to justify his claim that a subject (or a subject's reason) can inhabit a time different from its own historical time, since the "there is no history in the unconscious, which it does not submit to the dictates of 'normal' time" (40).

The concepts and mental functions that govern, to varying degrees, the Arab human being's conception of the world and the way he acts on it in the realms of producing and reproducing knowledge.... The Arab human being is herein understood as the person whose reason was formed within the context of Arab culture, and for whom this culture therefore represents his main, if not his only, referentiality.... By Arab culture we understand the entity that was constituted and consolidated during the period known as the age of codification.... In sum, Arab reason is the underlying structure of Arab culture as constituted during the age of codification. (70-71)

Thus, "reason" for Jabiri does not refer to the essential or ahistorical attributes of a particular race or ethnic group. Rather, it is a mode of knowing and producing knowledge the world, a mode that is always specific to the culture in which it is formed and of which it is constitutive.

Culture, in its turn, is historically specific: that is, bound to the milieu (natural, linguistic, social, political, religious) in which it is produced and of which it is a part. One would therefore expect culture to be different in different historical periods. The most critical claim that Jabiri makes in this regard is that the temporality of "Arab culture" (understood as historical intellectual activity, *al-thaqafa al-'alima*, and not popular culture, *al-thaqafa al-sha'biyya*) has been stagnant since the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD, and that consequent centuries only featured a regurgitation of the knowledge and, most importantly, of the "epistemological acts" that were instituted during that age. This is a claim that we have already seen in his critique of Arab ideology, and that he seeks to elucidate in the *Critique*.<sup>128</sup>

The claim that early Arab-Islamic culture constitutes the formative element of the modern-day Arab's experience of the (social and political) world is one that we have already encountered in both Laroui and Hanafi. Laroui's assertion is that the "mental apparatus" and affective experience of the contemporary Arab intellectual-subject (*salafi*, liberal, or nationalist) is infused with "traditionalism". He does not, however, explain how the contemporary Arab subject continues to be formed through a centuries-old mode of experiencing the world, nor does he provide us with a thorough examination of what that mode constitutes. What he does provide are some suggestive connections between traditional and contemporary modes of understanding history and human agency formulated to lead his reader to the conclusion that, as Jabiri would put it, Arab Islamic culture had been a "movement in place" since its genesis in Abbasid times (750-1519). Hanafi makes a similar assumption about the lasting influence of the "structure of consciousness" underlying the ancient Islamic disciplines on contemporary "Arab consciousness." Whereas Laroui's critique of Arab ideology provides some substantiation by drawing connections between ancient and contemporary modes of understanding

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<sup>128</sup> Indeed, Jabiri would agree that there were other moments of intellectual activity, such as that of Averroes (13<sup>th</sup> century AD) or Ibn Khaldoun (16<sup>th</sup> century AD), but he would post that there were only 'moments,' short-lived and with no lasting influence on the constitution of Arab reason. Jabiri also mentions the Arab *Nahda* as a time in which the transmission of European knowledge had produced a marked influence on Arab culture (44). Yet, as we have seen in his critique of Arab ideology, the way that Arab intellectuals had appropriated these knowledge had itself been reflective of the modes of knowledge production (analogical reasoning) that were produced in the Age of Codification.

history and agency, Hanafi takes this connection as a given, and conducts his analysis accordingly.

I suggest that Jabiri provides more conceptual clarity and precision to the theorization of the influence of cultural history on modern-day experience. Unlike Laroui and Hanafi, Jabiri is explicit in his awareness of the hypothetical status of the oft-repeated lament about<sup>129</sup> the stagnation of Arab culture, and of the logical impossibility of providing more than just suggestive evidence for its verity (which he tries to do in his critiques of Arab ideology and Arab reason). He is also keenly aware of the hazard of self-essentialization (or self-orientalization) that such a claim entails. In that vein, he describes his conceptual apparatus as a guard against “unscientific conclusions that using some concepts leads to. An example is the concept of ‘mentality’ or ‘mind’ (*‘aqliyya*) which, explicitly or implicitly, presupposes the existence of an ahistorical and atemporal mentality that is essential to every race or ethnicity” (41). We should understand Jabiri’s laborious definitions of these concepts (temporality of culture, cognitive unconscious, specificity of reason to its cultural milieu, etc.) as submitting a claim about the persistence of historical modes of understanding reality into the present, a claim that aims to avoid the traps of essentialism, unsubstantiated stipulations, and offhand assumptions. This is to not to say that Jabiri does not end up falling, to one extent or another, into those traps. It is to say that his awareness of them and his attempts at guarding against them surpass those of Laroui and Hanafi, and conveys a (post-colonial) consciousness of the hazards of reification characteristic of orientalist readings of Arab history.<sup>130</sup>

At this juncture, it is worth remembering that what is at stake for Jabiri, Laroui and Hanafi is not a critique of contemporary Arab subjectivity as such. Rather, they aim to explain the repeated failure of Arab attempts to institute modernity, and, in offering that account, to chart a method and a vision of how this problem can be analyzed and overcome. What is common to all three thinkers is that they attempt to do so not in the register of economic, social, or political analysis, but in the register of the cultural critique, which they conceive to be formative of the Arab subject’s approach to society, economy, and politics.

### ***The Political in the Critique: Authority and Subjectivity***

In his definition of “Arab reason,” Jabiri emphasizes the formative role of culture in Arab-Islamic history, but gives no indication of the role of politics. According to him, the concepts and epistemologies produced by intellectual activity in the age of documentation had—and continue to have—the most decisive influence on contemporary Arab modes of knowing the world. Politics makes two central appearances in Jabiri’s narrative, however. Jabiri understands culture as an “essentially political process,” in that “cultural hegemony is deployed as the way through which political movements attempt to establish or sustain their political authority,” an observation that he considers particularly

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<sup>129</sup> At the outset of the *Formation of Arab Reason*, Jabiri posits that “this claim needs to be substantiated, and to be substantiated sufficiently, and perhaps the reader will arrive at a similar conclusion to that which we hold by the end of this book” (1982, 42).

<sup>130</sup> Some of Jabiri’s critics, like Jurj Tarabishi, claim that Jabiri himself ends up offering an Orientalist reading of Arab Islamic history. For more on this point, see Tarabishi’s four-volume response to Jabiri in the *Critique of Critique of Arab Reason* (2002, 2002, 2004, 2005) bayrut: dar al-saki.

applicable to the history of Arab-Islamic culture (7). In this context, politics is understood as the quest to attain or maintain political rule, and ideology as the political subject's deployment of epistemology to achieve "cultural hegemony," to facilitate the process of grabbing or holding on to political authority.

What is remarkable about this understanding of the relationship between culture and politics is that the subject of politics (he who seeks authority) is placed in a position external to epistemology, with the capacity to manipulate it in accordance with the "logic of politics" (the quest to attain or maintain authority), which does not submit to the constraints of the epistemology regnant within any given historical context. Whereas the subject of culture varies in accordance with the "system of knowledge" that frames his historical and spatial contexts, the subject of politics, in Jabiri's estimate, seems to be animated by a singular and perennial motive: the quest to exercise control over others through political rule. The practices produced by this motive do vary across time and space, but the underlying principle of political action remains the same throughout Jabiri's *Critique*. In my discussion of the constitution of Arab reason, I shall track the different ways in which the political conditions the cultural in Jabiri's narrative, underscoring the motivational thrust of political action that underlies this narrative.

Though politics is initially conceived as a perennial quest for authority, its second appearance in Jabiri's *Critique* consists of the variable formulations of legitimate authority, human agency, and just rule. The forms of political subjectivity produced by the three contending epistemologies that have emerged in Arab Islamic history, per Jabiri's account, are *bayan* (explication/indication), '*irfan* (illumination) and *burhan* (demonstrative reasoning). While Jabiri explicitly describes the influence of politics (as the quest for authority) on the formation of each of these epistemologies, his account of politics as subjectivity is implicit, and can only be discerned through an interpretation of the implications of each of these epistemologies on Arab political subjectivity.

Before addressing Jabiri's account of Arab cultural history, it is important to consider the respective epistemologies of *bayan*, '*irfan* and *burhan*. The first two, characteristic of *Sunni* and *Shiite / sufi* (mystic) traditions respectively, he considers to have had the most decisive influence on the past and present formation of Arab theoretical reason. *Bayan*, literally "clear and eloquent speech" and the "act of indication," produces knowledge associated with studying the Qur'an, the text that represents the ultimate truth in the Arab-Islamic tradition. Accordingly, Jabiri uses the epistemology of *bayan* to refer to the disciplinary knowledges associated with understanding the Qur'an: namely, language and its various sciences (grammar, eloquence, etc.), jurisprudence, and theology. *Bayan* is the discipline that uses a knowledge of the Arab language to provide an exegesis of the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition. This exegesis is then employed to issue judgments about practical matters (jurisprudence) and to develop a theory about divinity and its relationship to the human world (theology). Since *bayan* regards truth as residing in the holy text, its mode of knowledge is to discern truth through a proper understanding of the text, and through reflecting on the world of creation to find evidence for the truth of text.

*Irfan*, literally "knowledge," that finds its roots in pre-Islamic traditions of knowledge (especially hermeticism) that have historically been integrated into Arab-Islamic cultural history through (Ismaili) *Shiism* and Sufism. As an epistemology, '*irfan*

contends that the true meanings of the Qur'an, and religious truth more generally, can only be attained through divine illumination, not linguistic exegesis or rational reflection.

The third and historically least-influential epistemology of *burhan* (demonstrative reasoning), is the one on which Jabiri argues the future Arab *Nahda* depends. *Burhan*, literally "evidence" (or the act of providing it), finds its origin in the Islamic translation and deployment of Greek philosophy, especially Aristotle's works, to develop an understanding of religion and the universe. It is a mode of knowledge based on reason's ability to attain (religious) truth without the use of texts, but rather through discerning purposive relationships between the various elements of the universe (natural, social, political, and mental).

Accordingly, my examination of these three epistemologies—or "systems of knowledge," as Jabiri refers to them—will first examine *bayan* and 'irfan as constitutive of Arab theoretical reason (and political subjectivity), followed by an analysis of *burhan* as a potentially transformative discourse in Jabiri's *nahda* scheme.

### ***Constitutive Discourses: Bayan and 'Irfan***

Political contention between the incumbent state and its opposition frames much of Jabiri's narrative about the consolidation and development of the epistemologies of *bayan* and 'irfan, and of Arab cultural history more generally. Though Jabiri's critique presents these two modes of knowing the world as contradictory, not least because of their intended use for ideological purposes by contending political forces, his ultimate assessment of their influence on Arab theoretical reason presents us with an account of these two epistemologies' combined effect on Arab reason and on the subject of politics it produces.

As noted earlier, Jabiri dates the consolidation of *bayan*, 'irfan, and *burhan* into three distinct epistemologies to the Age of Codification (mid 8<sup>th</sup> to mid 9<sup>th</sup> century AD), which corresponds to the first century of Abbasid rule in Islamic political history. The Abbasids, Jabiri reminds us, had assumed power by joining forces with two other camps who shared their opposition to the incumbent Umayyids (ruled 661-750 AD), who believed that political rule should stay with the kin of the late 'ali Ibn abi-Taleb (later known as *Shiites*) and the *mawali* (non-Arab members of the expanding Islamic state). After assuming power, the Abbasids politically marginalized its former allies, the *Shiites* and the *mawali*. In response, the latter took the battle to the "cultural realm, wherein, instead of contesting the present [Abbasid political rule], it attacked the Arab past and contested its cultural and civilizational status" (1984, 60). The intense cultural activity witnessed by this historical period should, Jabiri posits, be understood as the Abbasid state's attempt to "reconstruct the Arab national past, specifically in the realms of language and poetry," to rival the narratives spread by its former allies (ibid). Politics, understood as the quest for political authority, thus comprises the bases for the cultural movement known as the "Age of Codification." What is significant in Jabiri's estimate is the specific impact this cultural movement had on the "methods and [mental] acts through which Arab culture was reconstructed," and the effects of these methods and acts on the constitution of *bayan* (ibid).

The process of language compilation and codification in the early Abbasid era had two main effects on Arab reason. The first is the effect of the linguistic content (of the

compiled language) on the worldview of the Arab subject, and the second is the formative influence the language compilation method had on the disciplines of *bayān*. The process of compiling the various words of the Arabic language and codifying its rules of grammar was initially a response to the fear associated with the “contamination” of the true language by the increasingly cosmopolitan character of Islamic urban centers at the time. As a result, the non-urban Arab, the *a’rabii* or desert-dweller, appeared to represent the purest form available for the Arabic language. The result is that “the largest Arabic dictionary available to date, *Lisan al-‘arab*, does not transmit to us the names of the natural things, technical implements, or theoretical concepts that were known at the time it was written, and at the urban center in which it was compiled (Cairo). Rather, the eighty thousand entries it provides all revolve around the life of the *a’rabii*, the hero of the Age of Codification” (79).

The language that was codified was therefore anachronistic vis-à-vis the lives of the majority (and the more theoretically and technically advanced) within Muslim society at the time. Jabiri describes the worldview that this language carried with it as sensory (its understanding of the world based on the use of the senses), and ahistorical (because of a particular temporality inhabited by the desert-dweller). This temporality, Jabiri notes,

features a time that is expansive like the desert, repetitive and redundant, comprising a (natural, mental, civilizational) space that was quiet and empty, everything in it a sensory image, either visual or auditory. This world is all that the Arabic language transmits to its subjects, today and yesterday, and it will remain such as long as that language submits to the constraints of the Age of Codification. (87)

The ahistoricity of the Arabic language is not only a reflection of the repetitive temporality of desert life, however. It also reflects the particular method of codification that makes its usage possible. According to Jabiri, in contrast to the “empirical” bases on which the language was compiled, its codification was based on the “theoretical conception” of all the words that could legitimately be derived from the linguistic roots familiar to the desert dweller.<sup>131</sup> The result was a proliferation of terms that were theoretically possible, but did not reflect actual or common usage. More significantly, linguistic correctness was determined by whether a word could be referred back to its origin (root) in the language, and not by whether that word conveyed actual usage or a lived reality. “Words were correct,” Jabiri notes, “because they were possible, not because they were realistic (i.e., induced from social experience), and they were possible if they had an origin (*asl*) to which they could be returned, or a counterpart to which they could be analogized” (83). Along with this proliferation of hypothetical terms, there was a constraint upon the legitimate bases from which “correct” words could be derived per the codification of Arab grammar. The consequence, Jabiri concludes, was a “method

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<sup>131</sup> The Arabic language is based on a root system whereby every ‘authentic’ Arabic word (i.e., every word that originated in that language and was not assimilated from another language, like Persian or Greek) could be reduced back to a tripartite root, and where every root could be used to derive a multiplicity of words in accordance with a certain method of derivation (*awzan* or weights). For example, the root *k-t-b* (the root of the verb to write) could be used to derive the words writing (*kitaba*), library (*maktaba*), desk or office (*maktab*), book (*kitab*), letter (*maktoob*), etc. A similar structure applies to Semitic languages more generally.

designed to constrain language within fixed molds, rather than a system of rules used to compile language while preserving its capacity to develop and renew itself with historical change” (82).

The ahistoricity of the Arabic language thus conveyed two distinct attributes, both of which resulted from the methods employed for its compilation and codification during the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. First, that language reflected the world of the desert-dweller whose experience was significantly different from that of the majority of Muslims at the time, and therefore produced a plethora of terms which were either irrelevant or anachronistic. The desert-dweller’s language was also ahistorical because it reproduced the temporality of desert life, a temporality solely determined by the repeated rhythms of the sensory world (day and night, seasons, etc.) and the expansive stagnancy of the monotonous desert landscape. Another facet of the historicity of the Arabic language arises from the fixity of the rules of linguistic derivation, i.e., from the number of legitimate ways in which a word can be derived from its root or linguistic origin, and therefore be considered legitimate or authentic (based on the desert-dweller’s usage). The result is a dual constraint on the kind of language that can be considered “correct” and genuinely “Arab”: a methodological constraint, and a substantive one. Consequently, “the Arabic language had remained the same in its terms, meanings, grammar, syntax, and its methods of internal generation since the time of al-Farahidy (800-870 AD)” (86). Al-Farahidy’s method of codification rendered Arabic ahistorical, in the sense that it was designed to “guard” it against historical change, and therefore effectively make it unable to reflect and adapt to changing historical circumstances—social, economic, or political. Such language, Jabiri concludes, is ahistorical because it is supra-historical: “Insofar as it exists above history, the Arabic language is unable to respond to historical change” (86).

When Jabiri describes the desert as an “ahistorical” setting, he clearly has in mind another context whose temporality is “historical.” The setting he would probably juxtapose to the desert would be the city: a space marked by relatively dense human habitation and cross-cutting relationships (family, sub-tribe, tribe, etc.) of kinship, economic activity (commerce), and faith (religious affiliation), accompanied by various norms for regulating these different relationships (politics). Jabiri also juxtaposes the desert to the cosmopolitan settings of the urban centers of the Islamic state, whose diversity posed a threat to the “purity” of the Arabic language, as well as of the periodic cosmopolitanism of the commercial societies of Arabia, Mecca and Medina. The temporality of such a milieu is one of constant motion, not of the rhythms of nature, but of the cycles of commerce and their attendant flow of “foreigners,” and with them, new words, concepts, and ideas. This active temporality is also brought about by the dynamic character of different modes of human relationships (familial, religious, economic, political) that circulate around the city. Further, the landscape of the city is constantly “interrupting” or “transforming” nature (the land, the desert) with its dwellings and places for commercial and religious activities, located relatively close to each other. It is a landscape continually reconfigured in accordance with changes of its inhabitants, their number and their relationships, and with the flow of new ideas brought in by the “foreigner” about what the city should look like. The Arabic language, with its desert world and the fixity of its roots and methods, is one that cannot contain or accommodate the truly “historical” temporality of the city.

Jabiri's understanding of history can be further elucidated through his critique of the methods of compiling the Arabic language. The ahistoricity of these methods, Jabiri contends, consists in their analogical structure: namely, their conception of a word as possible only because it has a root in the language, and not because it reflects actual usage, resulting in the proliferation of anachronistic words. But the problem consists not only in the effect of the method of codification (the production of anachronistic words and the absence of others actually in use); it is also a problem of the method *itself*. According to the analogical method, a new word is considered correct only if it has a pre-existing root, or origin, in the language itself, which in turn is only correct if it has an origin in the lexicon of the desert-dweller, now conceived as the true representative of the "Arab past." The methods of codifying and using the Arabic language are both underlain by a temporality featuring a *return* to an "origin," be that in a text (an exhaustive compilation of legitimate roots) or a past (the desert-dweller's language construed as the language of the Arab past). The ahistoricity of that language consists in its backward thrust. Only *referring back* to the text/the past establishes the legitimacy of the new/the present.

We can infer from this critique that, for Jabiri, a truly historical movement in Jabiri's estimate, would be one that had a *forward* thrust. That is, a movement that considers the past to belong to a realm distinct from that of the present and the future, and the present and future as not definitively determined by the past. This forward-moving temporality is perhaps best elucidated by Jabiri's *nahda* mechanism, which we encountered in an earlier discussion. The "mechanism of awakening" or of modernity considers the past as a pillar, a set of founding principles which are mobilized in the present for the purpose of transcending both the present and the past on the way toward the future. Crucially, the past in this scheme is not an origin to be returned to, but a foundation for the future. The former movement is what Jabiri considers ahistorical; the latter is what he regards as truly historical, not only on account of its forward thrust, but in the sense that this movement creates something new, and, in order to do so, takes control over both the present and past, carving them into "pillars" and "founding principles" that enable forward movement. It is in both senses of ahistoricity, that of the desert and that of the methods the Arabic language, that we should understand Jabiri's statement that "the world in which the Arab lives, on the level of the words, expressions, conception and imagination, indeed on the level of reason, values, and affect, is a world that is poor, lacking, superficial, dry, sensory and ahistorical. It is a world that reflects the pre-history of Islam, the age prior to the formation of the [Islamic state]" (89).

The troubling connotations of this quasi-orientalist description of the Arabic language aside, what is important to note here is what Jabiri takes to be the constitutive influence of language on Arab political subjectivity. He links the world of the Arab language to the "age prior to the conquest of Mecca and the formation of the [Islamic] state" (ibid). The subject of the Arabic language not only inhabits the world of the desert-dweller; sensorially rich and conceptually poor as Jabiri portrays that world to be, he also inhabits a pre-political world, a world devoid of the expressions of legitimation associated with the Muslim political experience as it was shaped in the urban centers of Arabia after the conquest of Mecca, and with the subsequent expansion of Muslim rule over the Levant, Iraq, Egypt, and Persia. The political subjectivity of the Arabic language was, according to Jabiri, devoid of the capacity to grasp, inhabit, and influence the



complex social modes of the city dweller, let alone to engage in the political life he was capable of.

The ahistorical temporality of the Arabic language produces a subject whose mode of knowing and acting upon the world, of comprehending and responding to novelty, is that of *return* to an “origin” or counterpart in the textual or temporal past. The way that subject analyzes political reality depends on his classification of the problem as one that “branches” from a stable and known root, or an occurrence for which a counterpart can be found. The present and future are thus only knowable insofar as they can be analogized to the “past,” now construed as an origin. Indeed, the practice of construing the “past” or that which is “old” as correct and authentic, and the new as “intruding” and wrong, is, Jabiri posits, a principle that was first instituted in the linguistic compilation process. According to Khalil and his fellow scholars, the correct and original modality of the Arabic language can only be found in the speech of the desert-dweller, conceived as the speech of the “Arab past.” The effects of the consecration of the (constructed) past as an origin are dramatic, influencing not only the realm of Arabic language and literature, but also “the ‘development’ of Arab thought as a whole since the Age of Codification” (93). Though Jabiri makes this claim without justification, it is supported by his characterization of the problem of the Arab *salafi*, liberal and Marxist, who can only conceptualize a solution for the *Nahda* problematic by referring *back* to modular cultural and political forms offered by Islamic or Western histories (rather than constructing new modalities that are merely informed by those histories).

Analogical subjectivity is further deepened by the codification of analogy as the preeminent mode of producing knowledge in Islamic jurisprudence and theology. Jabiri contends that the jurist Shafi’i (760-816 AD) instituted the analogical principle of *qiyas* as the primary modality of issuing juristic judgment, in the absence of an explicit reference to the issue in the Qur’an or the prophetic tradition, and without a consensus among the prophet’s early companions. In jurisprudence as in language, analogy was understood as a “return” to the text (or prophetic tradition), to find an origin or a counterpart to which the issue at hand could be analogized. According to the Shafiite tradition, “for *qiyas* or analogy to take place there has to be a text from the Qur’an or the prophetic tradition that is taken as an origin (*asl*) or an evidence, and there has to be comportment, in meaning or similarity, between the new for which a judgment is required, and that origin.” Accordingly, *ijtihad*, the practice of jurisprudential judgment, consisted in “connecting one end with another and not the establishment of a new intellectual world based on a set of principles” (105).

Jabiri contrasts the analogical method to another that constructs intellectual (linguistic, jurisprudential) judgment through a set of logically induced or deduced principles. This method is, as we shall see later, the mode of knowledge on which the epistemology of *burhan* demonstrative reasoning is based. But it is also the mode of knowledge production which Shafi’i’s analogical method was intended to curb in the realm of jurisprudence. Jabiri tells us of the practice of issuing judgment based on “opinion or *rai’i*,” relying on an informed understanding of the texts and their discursive fields to form conclusions about issues on which the text was silent. Again, this involves the consideration of the text as a general principle that can be used as a guide for issuing particular judgments, not as an origin to which one should constantly return. Shafi’i’

devised his analogical method to constrain the practice of “opinion,” which had resulted in the proliferation of contradictory judgments across the expanding Islamic state. As with language, this method affected the mode of reasoning in the realm of jurisprudence, and Arab reason more generally, by reducing intellectual activity to the discovery “for every branch an origin to which it could be referred, and, consequently, for every ‘new’ an ‘old’ to which it could be analogized” (ibid). According to Shafi’i’s method, such origins could only be found in the text (the Qur’an or the compiled sayings and doings of the prophet). Thus, he concludes, “the text had effectively become the ultimate authority for Arab reason” (105).

In his exposition on jurisprudence as in his analyses of language, Jabiri’s central concern is how the analogical method, understood as a return to an origin in the past or the text, delimits the exercise of reason to finding connections between the present (the new) and the past, rather than engaging in creating new intellectual output. One could contend with Jabiri that a “move back” to the text or past could also constitute a move forward, in that this movement invariably invests the text/past with new meanings, and interprets it in new ways. Jabiri would probably agree with this suggestion. Indeed, Jabiri’s earlier reference to the *salafi’s* reading of the Islamic past (as a construction of that past in accordance with the needs of the Arab present) can be read as one such instance: a move back to the text that generates a new understanding of it, different from the one obtained by reading it as part of its historical discursive and semantic fields. Jabiri would also argue that, however innovative such interpretations of the text might be, they ultimately *depend* on the text (to varying extents) as the ultimate reference for justifying their ideas. Indeed, in his explication of the theological conception of the various possible modalities of interpretation of the text, Jabiri reduces the theological position to three possibilities: in the first, the meaning is spelled out clearly in the text, and the role of reason comprises “the assimilation of the meaning in question” (1986, 74). In the second, one meaning is used to convey another, as is the case with metaphors. Here, the role of reason is to infer and explain the implied meaning. The third possibility is that the meaning is ambiguous, and reason has to seek it out by exercising interpretation (*ta’weel*) and prediction. The interpretive range of these three modes is broad, but, Jabiri insists, “in all these cases reason is never independent of the text; instead, it gains its independence insofar as the text itself permits it to do so” (ibid). The subject of *bayan*—of language, jurisprudence, and theology—is delimited in his knowledge of the world by the possibilities made available to him by its text and its past.

*Bayan* not only forms its subject’s mode of knowing the world, it also forms his understanding of his relationship to that world, and determines the extent of his ability to act on that world. The theological notion of possibility or *tajweez* has the most decisive influence in that regard. Building on Averroes’s definition of *tajweez*, Jabiri describes it as:

The understanding of divine will as a capacity to do the thing and its opposite, from which follows the conception that all beings could be the way they are at the moment, or the opposite of that way. This implies the absence of a relationship of necessity between what is perceived as the “cause” and what is perceived as the “effect,” be that in the world of human thought or behavior, or in the world of natural happenings. (1986, 561)<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> The principle of *tajweez* can be better understood when placed within its historical context. Jabiri describes it as part of broader trajectory of theological thought that conceives of the relationships between

The direct implication of *tajweez* is the absence of a relationship of cause and effect between one's thought and one's actions, and between one's actions and their effects on the human and natural worlds. Human thought is only possible if God wills one to think, and human action is only possible to the extent that He wills one to act on that thought. The effects of one's action are contingent upon God's will for them to take place. Likewise, the relationships between beings in the natural world are ones of separation and co-existence, not inter-dependence and causation. Divine will intervenes at every juncture to bring about what seems to the observer like relational effects between beings in the natural world, just as in the world of human thought and action. The reason for this formulation is that Islamic theology conceives of an "effect" as something that "could only be produced by a free and able actor who could do what he wanted in the way that he wanted" (ibid), and that the only such actor is God. Accordingly, the subject of theology, or of *bayan* more generally, is one who understands his thoughts and actions, and the beings and entities of his world, as having no necessary relationship to one another, and as necessarily mediated by divine will.

According to *tajweez*, the subject's self-understanding is therefore not that of an "actor," whose thought is generated from within his own being, who acts on his own will, and whose actions produce certain effects for which he is responsible. Rather, it is a self-understanding that conceives of everything as contingent upon a transcendent will, and therefore not generated, executed, or claimed by the subject. The subject is solely the agent of a divine will, his capacity to think and act a reflection of divine ability and creation. Though Jabiri ends his *Critique of Arab Reason* espousing a similar view of the subject of *bayan*, and of Arab reason more generally (1986, 563), such an understanding fails to capture the broad range of theological positions that existed under the *tajweez* principle. More importantly for our purposes, this understanding fails to capture the remarkable variations in the modes of political subjectivity that had historically emerged from this principle as Jabiri's own account of Islamic political history.

In his *Critique of Political Reason* (1990), Jabiri is emphatic about separating the realm of epistemology from that of politics; the former being concerned with the modes of knowing and producing knowledge, and the latter with attaining and exercising

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all beings as one of separation and distinctness, rather than of connection and interdependence. The preeminence of the principle of separation in Islamic theological thought emerged in the context of arguing against the idea of "connection" between God and the world through creatures that shared his divine attributes, such as the totems of the polytheists of Arabia, or the sublime beings (souls, stars, etc.) of the Gnostics in the Levant and Persia. In both cases, polytheism and *shirk* are based on the notion that divinity is not only an attribute of God, but is also shared among other beings in the human or supra-human worlds; hence the insistence of early Muslim theologians on the separation between the divine and human worlds. The principle of "separation" also came to guide the relationship between beings in the natural and human worlds, because the analogical method was the main mode of producing knowledge in theology (as in jurisprudence) (1986, 175-6). Another implication of the analogical method in this context is the insistence that whereas God was distinct from and the ultimate cause of everything in the world, beings in the world were distinct from each other (by analogy) but incapable of creating any effect on one another (by reverse analogy: what is true of God's abilities cannot be true of his creations, since no one can be like God). The analogical principle plays a dual function here: the first in prescribing a certain mode of understanding the relationship between beings in the world (separation), and the second in presupposing that none of God's creations could partake in his divine nature, including his ability to create things, acts, thoughts, etc.

authority. This distinction notwithstanding, I suggest that Jabiri's examination of Islamic political history (his critique of political reason) is most instructive when read through his critique of Arab theoretical reason. Jabiri's account of Islamic political history should also be read as providing an account of the various modes of political subjectivity, of understanding and approaching the political world, made possible through the "possibility principle." In that vein, we can perceive at least three variations on the theme of *tajweez* in Islamic theology, all of which were intimately embedded in the political contexts in which they were formulated. These are the positions adopted by the *Jabriyya*, the *Mu'tazalites*, and the *Ash'arites*. In what follows, I provide an interpretive analysis of Jabiri's exposition of the first two positions to exemplify two widely varying modes of politically inhabiting the *tajweez* principle.

*Jabriyya* is the conception of human thought and action as entirely over-determined by divine will. Human actions are understood as manifestations of a transcendent will to which the subject can only submit, or of which he is a vessel; thus the quality of being "*mujbar*," forced or obliged, from which the theological position derives its name (*jabriyya*). Thus portrayed, this position is on one end of the continuum of positions made possible by *tajweez*, where the subject understands himself as possessing no will of his own, of his actions as conforming to divine predestination, and of himself as bearing no responsibility for those actions.

Contrary to what one would expect, the political subjectivity that *jabriyya* effected was not one of uniform passiveness or fatalism; but of active engagement with the world, even if it understood itself as an effect of divine predestination. Jabiri gives an account where *jabriyya* was considered the regnant understanding of human will and ability during Umayyad rule (661-750). He contends that it was the theological position the Umayyads used to justify overthrowing the incumbent ruler, 'Ali ibn abi-taleb (also Muhammad's nephew), and to legitimize the acts of violence they perpetrated during and after that time. Both the overthrowing of 'Ali and the killings of "fellow Muslims" that followed were, according to the *jabriyya*, merely a result of divine will and predestination, for which the rulers bore no responsibility. But *jabriyya* also had another facet, that of cultivating a subjectivity of submission to the incumbent ruler and of obedience to his rule, now conceived as the manifestations of divine will to which absolute submission was owed. Indeed, Jabiri gives us an account of the various ways in which the Umayyads cultivated the subject of *jabriyya*, including their mobilization of particular interpretations of qur'anic verses about fate and of prophetic sayings that "foresaw" Umayyad rule; their ways of referring to the ruler as the representative of divine will, such as "the caliphate—the representative—of God in the world," "the guardian in the name of god, amen Allah," "the chosen Imam"; and the circulation of these understandings and titles through addresses to the public (301-2).

Jabiri's analytical framework in the *Critique of Political Reason* presents us with the image of a political subject (the Umayyad) who consciously deploys the epistemology of *bayan* (a variation on the *tajweez* principle) to attain and maintain political authority. Tellingly, in the context of his political critique, Jabiri does not refer to *jabriyya* as a theological principle made possible by a certain epistemology, but as an "ideology" designed to attain political gain. A closer reading of Jabiri's work gives us a more nuanced understanding of the subjectivity of *jabriyya*, however. In a brief passage in his *Critique of Political Reason*, Jabiri refers to *jabriyya* not as a consciously-devised

discourse, but as itself an effect of the kind of subjectivity that exists within the tribe and which conditioned the way the subject understood religion. In this context, Jabiri notes,

the doctrine of the tribe is itself based on *jabr* or obligation. This is because what constitutes a tribe is not the aggregation of a group of individuals, but the way these individuals dissolve in that group, such that they no longer represent their own will, but the will of the group to which they belong, and consequently cease to be responsible for their actions as individuals. Rather, the tribe itself bears responsibility and credit for their actions, be those good or bad. The “imaginary of the tribe” is such that when one of its members conquers or takes revenge, his self-understanding is that of being forced and obliged to do what he did, and not of having the choice to act otherwise ... We should therefore not understand *jabriyya* as manipulative or hypocritical, but as a sign of an alienated consciousness, *wai’i mustalab*, within the context of the *tribe*.<sup>133</sup> (260)

Besides giving an account of the political subjectivity of *jabriyya*, Jabiri also offers an account of the multiplicity of subject positions that can be inhabited at any one point in time, and of the co-constitutive relationship between them. The foregoing formulation about the relationship between the subject of *jabriyya* and the subject of the tribe gains in importance given Jabiri’s expansive definition of a “tribe” as “all modes of group relationships that are underlain by an emotive charge, be that in a city, a party, a confessional group, etc.; in short, any identification that distinguishes the ‘self’ from the ‘other’ in the realm of politics” (48). The subject of *jabriyya* is constituted by the self-understanding of human agency that pervades the collective imaginary of the “emotive group” to which that subject belongs. Likewise, Jabiri’s exposition of the *Mu’tazalite* understanding of *tajweez* could be read as a case in which the subjectivity of doctrine (*Mu’tazalite* theology) enables the constitution of a new “group” that cuts across the “emotive bond” of the tribe, and forms a new one.

Jabiri conceives of the *Mu’tazalite* position as the main historical “response” to the determinist position of the *jabriyya*. According to the *Mu’tazalite* understanding, God’s will is indeed the ultimate cause of all belief and action, but the divine injunction to follow “the righteous path”—and the promised reward to those who do and punishment to those who don’t—necessitates a certain degree of human responsibility. One must be vested with an ability to judge right from wrong, and to act according to that judgment, if one is to be held responsible for one’s actions. To say otherwise would be to say that God was unjust: that He dictated what He knows is beyond human ability as He created it, which contradicts what God says about himself in the divine text. Additionally, to say that one is not responsible for one’s actions because there are divinely preordained would be to attribute one’s unjust actions to God, which would contradict the principle of divine justice. Accordingly, the *Mu’tazalite* position contended that divine justice, a central principle in Islamic theology, necessitates an understanding of the human being as vested with the ability to judge right from wrong, to act according to that judgment, and to bear the reward or punishment that accrues from this choice. In accordance with the principle of *tajweez*, the *Mu’tazalites* believe the human ability to judge and to act is merely a manifestation of the ability with which God endows him. Likewise, the effects

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<sup>133</sup> The traces of Jabiri’s political and philosophical commitments to socialist thought are unmistakable in his formulation of the “alienated consciousness” of the tribal subject. For more on Jabiri’s political and educational backgrounds, see the introduction of this dissertation.

of human actions are not “caused” by that action; rather, they are mediated by God’s enabling the effects to take place (i.e., a given act may or may not result in a certain result, depending on God’s will). That having been said, the *mu’tazalite* position assumes the existence of a particular “habit ‘*ada*” that organizes the functioning of the natural and human worlds. To be sure, this “habit” can be disrupted by divine will, but such disruption is uncommon (as in miracles). In the human and natural world, habit enables the development of various forms of human life and relationships. Ultimately, the *mu’tazalites* understand human agency as God’s conferral of an ability to think and act on the human, and his enabling of certain effects of human action, but neither of these abrogate man’s responsibility for his acts (1986, 195-99).

Historically, the *Mu’tazalite* position emerges as a culmination of various similar understandings of divine justice and human responsibility (*qadariyya*, *murj’at al-qadariyya*, etc.) which contest *jabriyya*’s nullification of the ruler’s responsibility. Instead, the *mu’tazalite* interpretation affirms the equality of all human beings in their ability to judge, to act, and bear responsibility. This claim confirms the equality of the ruler to his subjects in their ability and responsibility, and the affirmation of the subjects’ ability to rectify the ruler’s actions should they contradict the “righteous path,” that is, the subjects’ obligation to act in accordance with the divine injunction to “command the good and rebuke evil.” This *Mu’tazalite* position attracted the *mawali*, non-Arabs who had recently converted to Islam and who were treated unjustly (levied higher taxes and marginalized from political positions), the support of various groups that were in opposition to Umayyad rule (tribes of Yemen, the Abbasids), as well as one of the Umayyad rulers themselves (Yazid ibn Abdel-Malek) to adopt their creed. Ultimately, the “group” that was formed around the *Mu’tazalite* position featured Arabs and non-Arabs, incumbents and subjects, and cut across tribal affinities. On Jabiri’s account, the consolidation of the efforts of these various groups is what ultimately led to the ousting of the Umayyads in 750 AD during what came to be known as the “Abbasid revolution” (1990, 322-29).

The political subjectivity of the *Mu’tazalite* position was one that substantially differed from its *jabriyya* counterpart despite their common ‘origin’ in the *tajweez* principle. Whereas the former understood the political ruler as a vessel of divine will and ability, and of obedience as owed to that ruler in his capacity as a representative of divine will, the latter understood the political ruler and his subjects to all be vested with an equal ability to judge and to act, and therefore of being equally responsible for their actions before God. Equality in responsibility also implies equality in fallibility. For the *Mu’tazalites*, the principle of divine justice entails that wrongdoing cannot be attributed to God but to human judgment and will, human beings are therefore equal in being endowed with the ability to judge and act, but also equal in their proneness to error (of judgment and/or action). When paired with the religious injunction to “command good and rebuke evil,” this equality in fallibility between the ruler and the ruled orients the political subject towards the common well being of the political community, and endows him with the ability to act on his judgments about the “goodness” and “justness” of the political order. Put slightly differently, the *Mu’tazalite*’s political subject’s attunement towards the wellbeing of the collectivity is a function of that subject’s ability and obligation to judge the good, and to act accordingly. Though the *Mu’tazalites* and *jabriyya* both conceive of human will as derivative from divine will, their specific

formulations of the relationship between human and divine wills yield significantly different modes of political subjectivity.

The emancipatory character of the *Mu'tazalite* position notwithstanding, Jabiri cautions against the tendency of contemporary Arab intellectuals to overstate the “progressive” character of *Mu'tazalite* thought. In particular, Jabiri warns that the *Mu'tazalite* contention about the human ability to judge and to act, the principle commonly referred to as “the creation of acts,” should not be read as connoting “human freedom” in the modern (liberal) understanding. Instead, this principle should be read in the broader context of the principle animating *Mu'tazalite* thought: that of divine justice (*al 'adl*). The human ability to act is, Jabiri notes, primarily an affirmation that God is not responsible for human injustice and wrongdoing (1986, 205). This rejoinder is particularly instructive when we recall Hassan Hanafi’s interpretation of the edict of “the creation of acts” as representative of an Islamic notion of reason and freedom to choose (his acts, beliefs, political leaders, etc.) that is distinct from a vertical relationship with the divine. Such a reading, Jabiri would probably say, invests that principle with meanings inconceivable in its original historical context.

Thus far, I have provided two different ways of interpreting the principle of *tajweez*, the idea that human thought and action have no necessary effects and are conditional upon divine will. Though both interpretations are part of the Islamic theological and political trajectory, each articulates a different political subjectivity: one deemed its subject unagentic and non-responsible, the other invested him with the ability to think, judge, and act, and, consequently, to bear responsibility. Both have led to very different political “effects” in Islamic history: one to submission on the part of the ruled to an unjust ruler, and the other to a contestation of unjust rule in the name of a principle of equality, in the ability vested by God and in responsibility to God.

Jabiri’s conclusion about the effect of *tajweez* on the subject of *bayan* divests it of the promise borne by the diversity of these historical possibilities, however. For Jabiri, the various formulations of *tajweez*, ranging from the *jabriyya*’s to the *Mu'tazalite*’s, still conceives of the relationship between beings as one of possibility, not of inevitability. In Jabiri’s estimate, this produces an “enchanted view of the world” that conceives of events (natural, social, political) as possible even if they do not conform to present circumstances. Indeed, Jabiri attributes Arab ideology’s tendency to conceive of future possibilities that bear no relationship to present conditions to the persistent effect of *tajweez* on the contemporary Arab subject (1986, 570). Simply put, the political subject of *tajweez*, as Jabiri understands him, does not understand the future (natural, social, or political) as an “effect” whose various “causes” dwell in the present; rather, this subject sees the relationship between the present and future as one of possibility, not necessity. Accordingly, that subject feels no compulsion to understand the present on its own terms, and to use that understanding to instantiate the “causes” that could bring about future effects. He likewise finds no problem in making claims about the future that do not converge with the possibilities made (logically) available by the present.

This conception of the relationship between phenomena as one of possibility is complemented by the *bayanian* mode of reasoning, analogy. Jabiri describes analogical reasoning as, by definition, based on finding a plausible, rather than a definitive, relationship between the known and the unknown, the text and its meaning, the juristic judgment and its historical counterpart. In all these instances, the relationship is never

one of necessity or causality, only plausibility. Analogy in the world of texts is therefore equivalent to *tajweez* in the world of human thought and action. The subject of *bayan* understands his present and his future through a constant “return” to the text or the past, to make inferences about the *possible* relationships between those two worlds. The relationship is never definitive, because it is interpretive (of the past, of the text), so there can always be another interpretation that is more compelling. This notion of *possibility* also cultivates the *bayanian* subject’s understanding of his own agency and his ability to understand and effect change in his natural, social, and political worlds. He conceives of his thoughts as having no necessary relationship to his actions, and those actions as having no necessary relationship to their effects. In the realm of contemporary politics and culture, this expresses itself in unwarranted optimism or pessimism about the future that finds no basis in the present (563).

While Jabiri derives a damning conclusion from *qiyas* (analogy) and *tajweez* (possibility) about a subject beholden to the authority of the text and the past, whose conception of the future is one of tentative analogy and enchanted possibility, one can also argue that the subjectivity of *bayan*, the subjectivity of plausibility, can be thought of as providing fertile ground for human imagination and action that is not bound by a “scientific” understanding of the fixity of natural or human worlds. The subject of *bayan* might be thought of as a subject of contingency, whose theoretical (theological) and political history bespeaks a diversity of possibilities: some of bondage, others of contestation and political agency. Indeed, it is not entirely clear why Jabiri draws from the principle of “possibility” his conclusion about the enchanted view of the future. Jabiri himself concedes that the idea of divine will has yielded a variety of understandings of the natural and human worlds, one of which binds them to a certain “habit or ‘*ada*” that can be disrupted by divine will (as in a miracle), though it seldom is. This epistemology is different from that of modern scientific causality, but isn’t the latter’s applicability to the topic of human relations, and indeed, to nature itself, also contestable?

### ***The Subject of Resigned Reason:***

If Jabiri seems to overstate the influence that the text/past and the magical worldview of *tajweez* continue to have on the contemporary Arab subject, it is because he perceives these impulses to have been deepened by the epistemology of ‘*irfan*. As a mode of knowing the truth about religious text,

‘*Irfan* relies neither on sensory nor rational faculties, but on “illumination or *kashf*.” What they [the subjects of ‘*irfan*] mean by illumination is that their attainment of knowledge is direct, unmediated by reasoning or deduction. Rather, knowledge is transmitted into their hearts when the veil between them and the ultimate Truth is lifted through engaging in self-purification and asceticism.<sup>134</sup> (1986, 374)

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<sup>134</sup> It is worth noting that Jabiri provides a detailed historical and epistemological analysis of the emergence and diffusion of ‘*irfan*. In his political critique, Jabiri understands ‘*irfan* (or the “mythology of the imam’s rule” as he calls it there) to be a mode of knowledge that existed in Arabia (Yemen) and in the countries that were newly conquered by the Islamic state (Harran in the Levant and Alexandria in Egypt), and was then mobilized by opposition to the Umayyads. In his theoretical critique, Jabiri offers a lengthy analysis of the translation and transmission of hermetic and neo-platonic texts into Arabic and their extensive deployment in philosophical (al-Farabi, Avicenna), scientific (ibn Hayyan and al-Razi) and



Instead of exercising reason to discern the truth of the text, based on a knowledge of the language and its discursive field, *irfan* features the attainment of such truth through non-rational means, those of divine illumination and inspiration. This ability to attain unmediated knowledge of the Truth (the “hidden truth” of the Qur’anic text, *al-baten*) is restricted to the few who are able to engage in the self-purifying practices required, or, more often, to those “chosen” as recipients of such illumination, the *awlia*, literally followers of God, who include prophets and imams (330). It is in this sense that Jabiri describes the subjectivity of *irfan*, its “understanding of life, existence, and destiny,” as essentially “aristocratic.” The kind of salvation that the subject of *irfan* believes in is, by definition, only within the reach of the chosen few (255-58). The political subjectivity of *irfan* is thus one of the “knower,” who mobilizes his knowledge to lead others (as was the case in some instances of *Shiite* political history), or recedes from the world of earthly concerns to that of reflection and asceticism. Either way, the self-understanding of the political subject of *irfan* in Jabiri’s estimate involves distinction from, and elevation above, the “others” who have no access to the world of divine secrets and are not privy to divine illumination (375).

*Irfan*’s expansive mobilization of “myths” as the “truth” that lies behind the sacred text explains Jabiri’s anxiety about the “enchanted or magical view of the world” that this mode of knowledge institutes in its subject<sup>135</sup>. *Irfan* conceives the truth “not as a religious truth [based on linguistic interpretation of the text] or philosophical truth, or scientific truth; truth for the subject of *irfan* is the magical view of the world that is constituted by myth” (379). Indeed, it is in this sense that Jabiri refers to *irfan* as inaugurating “resigned reason” within the Islamic tradition: it is an epistemology where “reason” plays no role in the attainment or production of knowledge, yet “makes the ‘knowing’ self the only truth there is” (ibid).

The political history of *irfan* as Jabiri narrates it in his political and theoretical critiques is characterized by both contestation and apathy. Jabiri points to multiple attempts that the “subjects of *irfan*” have made to overthrow Ummayyad and Abbasid regimes. In the context of his political critique, Jabiri refers to how the “mythology of the *imam*,” the notion that the righteous political leader is the one with knowledge of the Truth of things and beings as transmitted to him by the prophet, had been coopted by several historical figures to mobilize disenfranchised populations. Indeed, the ultimate dethroning of the Umayyads was, Jabiri notes, only made possible by the alliance between the Mu’tazalites and their followers, and between those who believed that

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religious (Ismaili shiism) discourses. Most instructively, Jabiri considers the ultimate diffusion of *irfan* (with al-Ghazali in the 11<sup>th</sup> century) into the realm of *bayan* (the realm of interpreting religious texts for theological and jurisprudential purposes) as a culmination of the “crisis of epistemological premises, or *azmat al usus*” that pervaded the discourse of *bayan* at the time. The reason for this crisis as Jabiri sees it is the confusion between three contending modes of knowledge, all of which existed in the Arab-Islamic intellectual world in the 11<sup>th</sup> century: *bayan*, which understood knowledge as a product of accurate interpretations of the text based on a knowledge of the language and its discursive use; *irfan*, which based its knowledge of the text on illumination; and *burhan*, which conceived of reason as self-sufficient. For more on the “crisis of premises,” see Jabiri’s (1984) *Formation of Arab Reason*, pp. 272-281.

<sup>135</sup> Jabiri understands these myths to originate in the hermetic heritage of all mystic traditions within Islamic history, both *Sunni* and *Shiite*.

righteous rule could only be in the lineage of ‘Ali ibn Abi-Taleb, the prophet’s nephew who inherited the prophet’s knowledge of the truth and transmitted it to his kin.

But the history of ‘*irfan*, as Jabiri sees it, was also one of surrender to conquest and submission to authority. Here, Jabiri considers the success of the Crusades in undermining the Islamic state—in the Arab east in the 11<sup>th</sup> century as in Andalusia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century—as partially attributable to the “political neutrality” of the mystics, who conceived of the Crusades as “God’s punishment to Muslims for their wrongdoings” (1984, 325). In both instances, however, Islamic political history as Jabiri narrates it depicts the political subject of ‘*irfan* as submissive (to him who is perceived to possess the Truth), apathetic, or both. When that subject contests political power, it is not out of a “rational” conception of just rule, based on an account of what constitutes human ability and responsibility (as we saw with the Mu’tazalites), but on the prior identification of who the ruler should be (the *imam*).

Jabiri’s narrative of the constitution of Arab reason ends with the contention that the mode of knowing the world that the Arab subject continues to inhabit is informed by two main trends. First, analogical reasoning in its late, emulative, formalistic mode of application, as instituted by abu-Hamed al-Ghazali in the 11<sup>th</sup> century; and second, “resigned reason,” the non-rational conception of knowledge and its attainment. Jabiri considers al-Ghazali to be emblematic of the increasing fusion between the subjectivities of *bayan* and ‘*irfan*, whereby the “apparent” truth of the text can be discerned through analogical reasoning, while its underlying, “true” meaning can only be attained through illumination and union with the divine. In both modes of knowing the world, the text (its apparent and/or hidden meanings) presents the ultimate pivot around which reason revolves, and the world is invested with a magical quality, which renders “anything possible” through the direct intervention of divine will, or His mediated intervention via a divinely-endowed agent.

Jabiri’s assessment is indeed troubling, with its orientalist hue and its valorization of “reason” as a mode of knowledge that enables the subject to comprehend, control, and regulate the immanent and causal relationships in the natural and human worlds. In many ways, it reads as an assessment of Arab-Islamic history and culture through the lens of modern Western rationalism. But we might become more sympathetic to Jabiri’s dramatic conclusion if we attend to the subjectivity that he considers *bayan* and *irfan* to have foreclosed: that of demonstrative reasoning or *burhan*. To Jabiri, *burhan* was the epistemology that pervaded Andalusia and North Africa in the 13<sup>th</sup> century before its final eclipse by the spread of Ghazali’s mystically-infused modality of *bayan*, and ibn-‘arabi’s profoundly mystic tradition, in the Arab east and west. Despite its tragic fate in Arab lands in his narrative, Jabiri considers the reclamation of *burhan* the only way through which Arab “awakening or *nahda*” can be attained. Indeed, in the broader context of Jabiri’s scheme, the epistemology of *burhan* comprises the “founding principle” that the prospective “modernizing mechanism” should mobilize in order to align itself with and to transcend the contemporary Arab predicament. As such, *burhan* is not only a way of knowing the world, but the most promising way for altering it.

## *A Transformative Discourse: The Politics of Burhan*

Jabiri understands the epistemology of *burhan* to consist of the specific ways in which Arab-Islamic scholars appropriated Aristotelian philosophy. Historically, this appropriation featured several iterations across time and place, starting from its initiation with al-Kindi in Baghdad in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, until its later deployment by ibn-Rushd (Averroes) and al-Shatibi in North Africa in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. In each instance, however, what remains constant is, as Jabiri describes it,

A mode of knowing the world that deploys the human being's natural capacities, such as the senses, experience, and intellectual judgment, to produce knowledge about the world. The purpose of this mode is to establish a conception of the world that is coherent and harmonious, and, as such, that fulfills human reason's ambition to bestow a sense of order and organization on disparate phenomena, and that satisfies this reason's consistent demand for certainty. (1986, 384)

Jabiri's stake in *burhan* is precisely in the way it differs from *bayan* and '*irfan*. Whereas *bayan* and '*irfan* both depend on an external "origin," *burhan* is based on the premise that reason is "self-sufficient" in the sense that "it does not need an 'origin' external to itself to which it could return when faced with novelty, nor does it need to be 'inspired' with knowledge or given it by a 'teacher' [in the mystic sense]" (1984, 245). Rather, the epistemology of *burhan* uses a process of reasoning that proceeds from principle (premise) to conclusions about the natural and social worlds. These principles can either be discerned by induction from nature or human relationships, or be deduced through contemplation (which itself is a result of prior knowledge, which exists because of cumulative observations of its surroundings; for example, the principle that if two elements are equal to a third, then they are also equal to each other, or the principle that a thing cannot be a thing and its opposite at the same time).

The process through which the *burhan* of reasoning proceeds from premises to conclusion is not analogical in the *bayanian* sense. That is to say, conclusions are not reached through referring the "unknown" (a new occurrence) to the "known" (the occurrence's perceived counterpart in the past, or its perceived "origin" in the text or in predecessors' consensus); rather, they are arrived at by proceeding from general principles (two definite premises) to a third (the unknown) that follows from them logically. An instructive juxtaposition between these two modes of reasoning is given by the scholar ibn-Hazm, who contrasts his *burhanian* way of attaining knowledge against the analogical method Muslim jurists and theologians had adopted hitherto. Ibn Hazm posited that the way to determine whether wine (*nabeeth*) was prohibited, based on the Qur'anic injunction, was first to establish the bases on which *khamr* (the classical Arabic word for alcohol) was prohibited in the text and formulate a general principle that reflects this prohibition, before applying it to specific instances.<sup>136</sup> Ibn-Hazm induces from the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition that the reason for prohibiting *khamr* is that it causes

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<sup>136</sup> It is important to note that ibn-Hazm establishes his belief in the existence of the divine and in prophecy using rational deduction.

drunkenness. Accordingly, he proceeds from the premise that “wine causes drunkenness” (whose verity can be established by experience), then pairs this premise with another that is induced from the text—“all that causes drunkenness is prohibited”—to arrive at the conclusion that “wine should therefore be prohibited” (1986, 526). In the analogical tradition, reasoning would proceed from the injunction “*khamr* is prohibited because it causes drunkenness” to “wine is also prohibited” because “wine is analogous to *khamr*.” The crucial difference here is that analogical reasoning does not take the textual injunction (*khamr* is prohibited) as a basis for formulating a general principle (all that causes drunkenness should be prohibited). Rather, the jurist needs to “return” to the text each time to establish the analogy between the unknown (wine) and the known (*khamr*). Whereas *bayanian* analogy consists in matching the “part” with the “part” (*khamr* with wine), *burhan* consists in formulating general principles about the “whole,” which could then be applied to the “parts,” as well as mobilized to build further knowledge about the world of beings (in this case constructed according to the principle that “all that causes drunkenness should be prohibited”). Further, whereas analogy between the different parts constructs a relationship of “probability” between them (wine is most probably prohibited because it is similar to *khamr*), *burhan*’s method institutes “certainty” by proceeding from two definite premises to a conclusion that necessarily follows from them.

One can infer from Jabiri’s discussion of *burhan*’s conception of the natural and human worlds that it is teleological in the Aristotelian sense: that is, the elements of the natural and human worlds are connected to each other in a relationship of cause and effect and oriented to fulfill the particular purpose or “final cause” of their being. In the Islamic tradition, this purpose consists in God’s will for his creation (for example, the movement of the planets in specific orbits is designed to fulfill the purpose of the harmony and stability of the universe as a whole). Accordingly, God’s will does not take the form of habitual intervention to produce certain effects (for example, God’s ongoing guidance of planetary movement in one direction and not the other), but in his establishment in a “system” whose parts are endowed with the ability to fulfill their respective purposes. In the case of the human being, this endowment consists in the ability to judge and to act, and therefore to be held responsible for those actions.

In that context, Jabiri discusses Averroes’s conception of the universe as operating according to set of necessary relationships between its different parts. Accordingly, divine will does not appear as the ability to cause a thing and its opposite to coincide, but as an order comprising various parts that fit together harmoniously and purposefully. Indeed, according to Averroes, “the position that beings could be the way they are, or the opposite of that way implies the absence of [divine] wisdom and of comportment between the different elements of divine creation” (as quoted in Jabiri, 1986, 534). To Averroes, this harmonious scheme includes the creation of the human as a being capable of making judgments, acting on them, and being responsible for the effects these actions bring about. In that respect, Averroes posits that “God created in us powers that could achieve a thing and its opposite. But since achieving these things could not be attained except through the causes that He provides in our external world, our acts should be accrued to both these things”—that is, to our bodily powers, which are generated by the relationship of cause and effect between bodily functions, and to the conditions of our surroundings, which also follow a causal (i.e., purposeful) pattern.

The subjectivity of *burhan* thus differs from its counterpart in *bayan* in two important ways. First, *burhan*'s claim about the self-sufficiency of reason implies that its subject is beholden to neither text nor precedent in the past. Indeed, ibn-Hazm's consideration of the Qur'anic prohibition on alcohol as authoritative derives from his prior establishment of the verity of divinity and prophecy, through a process of rational reasoning (featuring both deduction and induction). The subject of *burhan* thus relies upon the constant deployment of reason to generate principles (based on induction from the natural or social worlds, or from texts whose authoritative status has been established by rational judgment), and to produce knowledge based on those principles. The movement from premise to conclusion has a forward thrust: the subject does not "return" to an origin, but rather builds or develops a premise. The second distinction between the subject of *burhan* and his counterpart in *bayan* is therefore a difference in the temporalities they inhabit. Whereas the subject of *bayan* inhabits a temporality-of-return that apprehends the present and future through persistent reference to an authoritative past,<sup>137</sup> the subject of *burhan* inhabits a forward-moving temporality, in which the past and the present must submit to rational judgment before being inaugurated as premises from which knowledge can be generated. The "past" thereby ceases to comprise an authority in and of itself. It is only considered authoritative insofar as it aligns with another "authority," that of rational judgment.

The forward thrust of the subjectivity of *burhan* suggests it is better able to institute change. Instead of harking to the authoritative past to respond to change, the subject of *burhan* is potentially capable of taking the initiative to institute change by generating new modes of understanding and acting on the world, in accordance with pre-existing principles about the functioning of the natural world functions and the principles that should guide social and political relationships. Jabiri offers the example of the jurist Shatibi's, who uses the text and prophetic tradition to derive (through induction and deduction) a set of "purposes of Islamic law, *maqasid al-shari'a*" that should be used to guide "Islamic legislation." These *maqasid* (purposes) comprise the protection of religion, life, honor, wealth and reason.

These examples aside, Jabiri provide no historical instances of *burhan* as a mode of engaging the world in Islamic political history, as he does with *bayan* and *irfan*. What he (inadvertently) provides in the finale of his *Critique of Political Reason*, however, is an example of how *burhan* might be used to think about politics within an Arab-Islamic historical trajectory. Specifically, Jabiri explains how democracy could be validated as a means of political rule in contemporary Arab politics, by inducing a "general principle" about just political rule from the "ideal model" of Muhammad's rule in Medina.

The general principle that can be derived from Jabiri's discussion of Muhammad's rule is that of non-despotism. Jabiri underscores Muhammad's repeated refusal to be named a "king" or "head" of his group, despite his performance of the role of political leader during the Meccan and Medinian phases of early Islamic history. Tellingly, Jabiri adds, "the followers of Muhammad did not understand themselves, nor

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<sup>137</sup> As I note earlier (p. 65), this reference to the authoritative past entails the deployment of reason's capacity to interpret the text (or "tradition" more generally) to inform understanding or judgment of the (new) matter at hand. Despite its "rational" entailments, Jabiri regards this interpretive deployment of reason as 'inferior' to its Aristotelian counterpart that posits a necessary relationship between premise and conclusion instead of *bayan*'s positing of a "plausible" relationship between analogous 'parts.'

did their opponents understand them, as being ruled upon by Muhammad. Rather, these followers referred to themselves (and were generally referred to) as the companions of Muhammad, as *ashab* Muhammad or his *sahaba*” (1990, 366). This understanding of the relationship between Muhammad and his followers as one of companionship and partnership in responsibility was buttressed by repeated Qur’anic injunctions about the centrality of “consultation” to the conduct of Muslim affairs. In that vein, Jabiri notes how the Qur’an had established the bases of the “companionship” between the prophet and his followers early on during the Meccan (earliest) phase of Islam in the verse “those who hearken back to the Lord and establish regular prayer...and those who conduct their affairs through mutual consultation, are those on whom we bestow our sustenance” (3: 159). The Qur’an then issues a reminder to the prophet and his followers in the Medina phase, because “the Islamic message was rapidly developing into a state” (ibid), to “pardon them, and ask forgiveness for them, and consult them in affairs (of moment)” (42:38).

Importantly, Jabiri does not use the Qur’anic commendation or prophetic practice of consultation to make the facile argument that this practice was the historical equivalent to modern-day democracy. Rather, what he does is induce from these moments (and others) an underlying principle about the understanding of just rule in the Islamic tradition. The understanding that Muhammad and his followers had of their relationship, the character of his political leadership (as legislator for the group, enforcer of divine legislation, leader in war, arbitrator, etc.), and the Qur’anic injunctions about consultation all point to the conception of just political rule in Islam as necessarily non-despotic. The idea and practice of consultation were directed at curbing the ruler’s impulse to “follow only his own judgment, *yastabidda bi al-rai’i*” or to “claim ultimate possession of the matter [of rule], *yastabidda bi al-amr*,” both of which are entailed in the Arabic term for despotism, *al-istibdad*. Simply put, “considering these Qur’anic commands and prophetic sayings and practices as founding principles [*usul ta’isiyya*] blocks the path against all forms of despotism” (367). Jabiri builds his argument for democratic rule on the basis that it provides the most effective modality for preventing despotism hitherto devised by humanity (372).

## Conclusion:

Jabiri’s *Critique of Arab Reason* ends with a call to “return to the past,” to identify and align with the founding principles upon which the Arab future can be built. Jabiri calls for deploying *burhan* by inducing its underlying “premises” from the past and proceeding to future “conclusions,” but beyond this, he calls for a “*nahdawi*” or modernizing deployment of *turath*. Indeed, we can now understand Jabiri’s definition of the “*nahdawi* mechanism”—the mobilization of *turath* as a set of principles from which one starts rather than an origin to which one returns—as itself an instance of applying *burhan* to what he considers the modern Arab predicament.

We can understand Jabiri’s move-to-the-past as a means of establishing the future, proposed at the end of the *Critique of Arab Reason*, in three registers. The first is the role this move plays in the broader trajectory of Jabiri’s project. If Jabiri’s goal is the implementation of the *Nahda* project by engaging *turath* in a *nahdawi* way, then his identification of the “foundations” of the Arab intellectual and political future by way of

a critical examination of the Arab past is a kind of performance of the first step of the *nahdawi* mechanism as he understands it: critically examining the past in order to “contain it instead of being contained by it.”

The second register in which we may understand Jabiri’s reliance on *turath* is ideological. Jabiri intervenes in a broader debate about the relationship between “tradition” and “modernity” that, to borrow Hanafi’s expression, occurs in an intellectual and political milieu increasingly polarized between “secular” and “*salafi*” strategies for progress, and in which the “*salafi*” pole enjoys more currency than its secular counterpart. Though Hanafi’s characterization reduces a remarkably complex intellectual terrain to only two contending positions, it depicts contemporary Arab intellectuals’ understanding of the intellectual milieu in which they make their interventions, as obviated by Jabiri’s own critique of Arab ideology<sup>138</sup>. In that context, Jabiri understands his intervention to be “ideological” in the sense that it is “biased to the principles of democracy and rationality” (1982, 7:1990, 372). As with Hanafi, Jabiri’s “return” to the past in a quest for “foundations” on which to base his claims for “democracy and rationality” should be understood as an attempt to lend historical (Islamic) genealogies to concepts that have increasingly come to assume a secular undertone in Arab ideological discourse since the 1970s. It is in that sense that I suggest Jabiri’s move-to-the-past should be read as strategic, and not only as purposive (i.e. aiming at attaining the *nahda*’s *telos* as he envisions it).

My interpretation of Jabiri’s project attempts to underscore its political-theoretical thrust. To that end, I have highlighted his understanding of political change as a component of a broader process of “awakening,” in which intellectual engagement with and critique of the cultural past plays a primary role. Jabiri’s critique of Arab ideology, the second component of his political theory, can then be understood as a critique of the inability of the contemporary Arab intellectual-subject to attain the necessary “critical distance” from his investment in, and/or constitution by, his cultural past, in order to produce knowledge about the present and the future. Accordingly, I have suggested that Jabiri’s critical method should itself be understood as an attempt to enact a transformation in the intellectual-subject’s approach to *turath*, an approach which Jabiri understands to be a product of that intellectual’s constitution via *turath* itself. My interpretation of Jabiri’s *Critique of Arab Reason* elucidates how Jabiri inhabits this critical distance to produce an examination of the historical constitution of the Arab subject. In so doing, I have used the lens of political subjectivity to provide an expansive account of the political implications of Jabiri’s critique of the subject of Arab culture, above and beyond Jabiri’s own understanding of politics and the political. Likewise, I have argued that Jabiri’s identification of *burhan* (demonstrative reasoning) as the epistemology on which to found Arab “cultural awakening or *nahda*” entails a conception of political subjectivity that differs, in its temporality and its agency, from the subjectivities of *bayan* (indication) and ‘*irfan*’ (illumination) that had hitherto constituted the Arab subject’s mode of knowing and acting on the world.

Jabiri’s framework for examining Arab-Islamic history should itself be understood as an attempt to enact a transformation in its Arab readership. Like Laroui

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<sup>138</sup> For an account of the complexity and convergences of different ideological currents in Arab thought, see Michaëlle Browers (2009). *Political Ideology in the Arab World: Accommodation and Transformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

and Hanafi, Jabiri understands history as a set of stages whose sequence is determined by immanent factors (social, economic, political, cultural, intellectual), and the intellectual as the figure responsible for steering that history towards “modernity.” This conceptualization is meant to unsettle the ways in which the (perceived) audience had hitherto inhabited their heritage as either the ‘origin’ to which the Arab subject should return, or a bygone past that he should definitively break with. Instead, the “alternative histories” forged by Hanafi and Jabiri, are meant to relegate *turath* to the past without rupturing with it. In a sense, what both these thinkers do is attempt a reinterpretation of *turath* that transforms its temporality from the “ever present,” to use Laroui’s expression, to the past. Unlike Laroui, for Jabiri and Hanafi transforming *turath* into a past does not entail leaving it behind; rather, it entails living it in a different way. The past is neither “glorified” nor “backward,” but is a product of its time, place, and consciousness, that is, within a secular history; the past should be understood on its own (historical, political, social, cultural) terms and moved beyond. What is common among these three thinkers, however, is that they all conceive of a singular ‘correct’ way of relating to the past in the present, a normative experience of time that should be understood and enacted should the subject desire to become “modern,” that is, to move forward to the proper future.



## **Conclusion:** **Reconsidering the Political in Arab Thought**

*No thought can exist without words, concepts, expressions, and models. Does it not then make sense that we first examine the mental apparatus (al-jihaz al-dihni) of Moroccan leaders before judging their achievements in the realms of politics and culture?*

Laroui (1995, 23)

*...We still live the binary conception of the world...in the way we conceive of our society and its institutions, both of which we see as revolving around a head who alone is the inspired, the teacher, the leader, the perfect, the sacred, and the worshipped.*

Hanafi (1992, 16)

*We can encapsulate the subjective condition necessary for establishing democracy in any context in one expression: the will-to-democracy (iradat al-demokratiyya). The will-to-democracy depends on being conscious of [democracy's] necessity, and the consciousness of that necessity depends on the extent to which [democracy] is rooted in thought and culture.... The contemporary Arab human being had not yet attained, on the level of consciousness, the necessary rupture with pre-modern political thought.*

Jabiri (2004, 97)

This dissertation aims to appropriate for political theory three thinkers who do not understand themselves as political theorists. My argument does not rely on figuring “the political” as a bounded realm through which these thinkers ponder the maladies of the contemporary Arab political condition; rather, I argue for this appropriation by tracing the mutual constitution and the fundamental inseparability of the realms of the “cultural” and the “political” in each of these thinkers. Whereas Wendy Brown (2005) posits that, “across its disparate modalities, political theory takes its bearings from a tacit presumption of the relative boundedness and autonomy of the political...[from] defining the political as distinguishable (if not distinct) from the economic, the social, the cultural, the natural, the private/domestic, the familial” (61), the preceding chapters have argued that the political theory of Laroui, Hanafi, and Jabiri can only be discerned if we assume the porousness, permeability, and penetrability of the political by what these thinkers refer to as “culture.” I have made this connection by tracing in the work of these thinkers the formative effect of “culture” on the making of political subjectivity: We have probed in each case the workings of culture and history in fashioning the subject’s approach to the world of collective being, decision-making, rule, past, present and future.

In concluding this project, I would like to open up the relationship between the cultural and the political for each of these thinkers in two registers. The first is the relationship of the cultural and political in these thinkers’ writings; the second concerns their intellectual (cultural) intervention itself as a political act—that is, an act of critique and self-emancipation.

### ***Culture as the Site of Politics:***

Any qualms we might have about the formative linkage these thinkers forge between culture and politics may be allayed when we remember how each of them defines the “cultural.” In my respective interpretations of Laroui, Hanafi, and Jabiri,

culture emerges as the site where consciousness is formed; where the subject's mode of knowing the world, particularly the world of social and political "reality," is constituted. Culture is less a body of historical texts, ideas, or practices, and more about the way these ideas and practices define the self, formulate history, and chart the contours of the future. Culture is not so much the specific content of a tradition, but the *mode* of approaching the world that this tradition dictates. In short, culture is formative of epistemology, of how the subject knows his world and what he comes to know about it. Additionally, insofar as knowledge of the world entails a knowledge of the self, culture is also constitutive of ontology, of the subject's understanding of his being-in-the-world and how that being relates to its perceived past, present, and future. Culture is constitutive of politics insofar as the subject's understanding of his own being, history, and agency condition his particular political subjectivity, especially his approach to authority, legitimacy, and resistance.

We first encounter the notion of culture as the site of subject-formation in Laroui's works. In his *Contemporary Arab Ideology*, Laroui reminds us that "cultural critique" consists in examining the "mental apparatus" of the subject (the Arab political leader and/or intellectual in colonial and postcolonial times)<sup>139</sup> by analyzing the "words, concepts, expressions, and models" deployed by that subject and judging the extent to which they helped him attain his objective of achieving "modernity" (1995, 23). But the locus of "cultural critique" is not only the "mind" and its tools (*adawat*) or its apparatus (*jihaz*); it includes the critic's attunement to other sensibilities, such as those issuing from the "psyche" (*nafsaniyya*, 71) and "affect" (*wujdan, shu'ur*, 253). Likewise, the critique appeals to the subject's "conscience" (*dhameer*, 88) as much as to his "reason" (*al 'aql*, 255). For Laroui, these different facets of the subject's experience are captured by the concept of "consciousness" (*wai'i*).

Laroui's usage of "consciousness" has a distinctly Marxist inflection, in that it connotes modes of experiencing reality (knowing, feeling, judging) derived from particular stages of socioeconomic development. However, where a Marxist would understand the materiality of the subject's condition (his embeddedness in a particular class and its attendant mode of production) as the deepest influence on consciousness, Laroui views the Arab relationship to the West as the most significant determinant of the intellectual-subject's consciousness. Laroui does not negate the relationship between consciousness and materiality, but modifies it in accordance with the specificity of the Arab colonial and postcolonial conditions, and of the persistence of historical modes of consciousness ("traditionalism") in Arab subjectivity. Driving Laroui's discussion of these influences is, as Pandolfo (2000) argues, the emancipation of Arab consciousness from "the two foreign voices [the West and the Past] that speak from the vacant place of the Arab self" (122), and to endow that consciousness with the ability to become aware of and embody its own social reality instead (Laroui, 1995, 88).

Laroui's critique conceives of the modern Arab subject's mode of consciousness as primarily determined by the extent to which the "Arab self" is penetrated by the West,

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<sup>139</sup> In the epigraph above, Laroui identifies his subject as the Moroccan political leader. However, in the paragraph that follows, he adds, "It is evident that I could not constrain my endeavor to the Maghreb, and eventually expanded it to the Arab region as a whole. Moroccans resort to a problematic that was previously resorted to in other Arab countries. I could not issue a judgment on the former without also judging the latter" (1995, 23).

in the wake of Western colonial intervention in the Arab world. He therefore delineates the history of that consciousness as corresponding to colonial, nominal independence, and the nation-state stages of modern Arab history (24). At each of these stages, the way Arabs define themselves, their history, and their future depends on how they juxtapose the Arab self to the “Western Other”: “Who among us does not realize that a particular image of the West dwells in the consciousness of each of us, and that Arab-Islamic identity is determined according to what that image reveals and conceals?” (53). For each stage, Laroui renders a paradigmatic figure whose mode of consciousness bespeaks the extent to which the Arab intellectual can grasp the “West,” given the level of socioeconomic development in the Arab context. The cleric, the liberal political reformer, and the technophile all represents various “stages” of Arab consciousness that correspond to successive levels of “social differentiation,” which enable each one to attain a “broader and deeper” understanding of the “consciousness” or “image” of the West (61). The “cleric” sees and emulates the West of Religious Reformation; the “liberal” identifies the soul of the West as that of the 18th century liberalism of Montesquieu; and the “technophile” locates the progress of the West in “modern industry” (55). Each figure, Pandolfo explains, “frames the discursive fields within which Arab thinkers speak” (123), and therefore subjugates them to a mode of knowing the world and acting upon it that does not correspond to the Arab social and political condition.

This divergence of Arab consciousness from Arab reality is multiplied by the fact that none of these imported figures corresponds to the West that is contemporaneous with each of them, so an understanding of the *actual* West (and of the Arab self, past, and future in juxtaposition to that West) forever eludes the Arab intellectual. His understanding of himself and his condition is therefore multiply “ideological” (i.e. split of and distorting his reality): He adopts modes of consciousness that do not correspond to his reality, and he adopts them when they have reached their “twilight form” in the West: that is, when they have diverged from the way the West conceives of itself at the time. Accordingly, Laroui portrays the cleric’s ideas of religious reformation to originate not in Martin Luther’s thought, but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian clergy’s understanding of religious reform after the clergy was marginalized from the “productive core” of the modern industrial West. Likewise, the liberal relies on a “weak and barren” 19<sup>th</sup> century liberalism, not its 18<sup>th</sup> century counterpart (“Who would contemplate descending with Montesquieu to the level of J.S. Mill?” (56)). In the same manner, the technophile comes to echo the notion of industry adopted by Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells (as “a means to leisurely living”), and fails to capture the transformative understanding posited by Saint-Simon or Marx (56-7). It is not the “intention” of the West to deceive the Arab intellectual: rather, the West presents the Arab intellectual with these bygone modes of consciousness because they comprise the only “level” on which their communication can take place at the given historical moment.

It is as if, in the effort to make sense of itself, the Orient turned into an archeologist and rediscovered superseded forms of Western consciousness. In as much as each time it is the West that provides the elements of discussion, one might be tempted to say that it confuses us on purpose, by artificially keeping alive a few of its older sloughs. This would be wrong, however, for it is clear that these two societies, slowly interpenetrating, can only dialogue in terms of

religious consciousness, at first, then political and finally technological consciousness.<sup>140</sup> (43)

The relationship between the Arab mode of consciousness and the social, economic, and political reality of the Arab condition is therefore mediated by Arab fantasy of the West. The changes in Arab social reality only matter insofar as they enable the Arab intellectual to capture or “dig for” succeeding forms of Western consciousness, but they do not directly reflect the way the subject comprehends or engages with that reality. Colonialism thus had a distorting effect on the Arab subject’s relationship to the materiality of his condition, an effect that is multiplied by the residues of pre-colonial modes of consciousness that persist within Arab subjectivity and pull it further away from “corresponding with reality” (254).

Traditionalism captures for Laroui the mode of understanding self and history that pervaded Arab consciousness prior to the violent rupture brought about by colonialism. Traditionalism draws on a conception of history “that does not ascribe to events a subjective weight, an effect, or meaning, but sees them as a disparate and intermittent, in need of an objectivity to be added to it from another realm...[which occurs when] divine command incarnates in human life as it did during the time of the prophet” (1973, 54). Accordingly, when traditionalism calls for “learning from the past,” it does not imply the “establishment of a new order that transcends its predecessor” but rather the “replication of an entire experience that was lived in the past” (ibid). The role of the subject of history in this case is to bear witness to the workings of divine will, and to record them as accurately as possibly, without judgment as to their underlying “effect” on the course of history.

Laroui contrasts this understanding with the modernist (or what he calls “historicist”) one, which conceives of history as a domain of continuous change, in which the past affects but does not determine the choices of the present, and in which the human subject is the primary agent of, and bears responsibility for, that change. This subject, is not to “bear witness” or to observe history’s workings from afar. Rather, the subject of modern history understands this history as his own, and the future as of his own making, and is therefore compelled to narrate this history in a way that accounts for its events and serves his desired ends. For Laroui, this modernist understanding of history is political because it blends “historical consciousness with political consciousness,” or the subject’s understanding of history with his engagement with that history, to shape a particular vision of the future (58-9). This view, Laroui contends, “dominates the minds of the men who direct modern industrial society be they intellectuals, politicians, or revolutionary workers” (59). It is therefore the mode of consciousness that he insists should be adopted by, or inculcated within, the Arab subject (especially the intellectual and political leader), if that subject wants to be attuned to the material reality of his contemporary context, one that has continued to be shaped by the West since colonial time.

For Laroui’s, the colonial encounter generated a fundamental rupture between Arabs and their pre-colonial past. “The situation in which we have been living for the past two centuries,” he writes in his *Concept of Reason*, “is one in which every

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<sup>140</sup> This translation is quoted from Stefania Pandolfo’s “The Thin Line of Modernity: Some Moroccan Debates on Subjectivity” in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell, Minneapolis: Minnesota (2000), pp. 115-145.

relationship between us and the achievements and logic of our cultural heritage has been severed” (1996, 12). This severance was inflicted upon Arab consciousness through violence, “for Arabs were destined to enter modern history only through defeat and occupation” (1995, 51).

But Arabs were poorly positioned to grasp the truth about their condition, either because they were haunted by anachronistic modes of Western consciousness, or because of the persistence of the traditionalist (pre-colonial) mode of conceiving reality. Either way, Arab consciousness does not correspond to the present Arab condition, and this inhibits the Arab subject from living in, understanding, expressing and acting upon the present in effective ways. His political subjectivity—his capacity to enact his will on the present to shape it into a desired future—is continuously hindered by his servitude to the “West and the Past” (Pandolfo, 122). At its core, Laroui’s oeuvre is about emancipating the Arab subject, most particularly the intellectual and the political leader, from this subjugation to these two falsehoods, by de-mystifying that subject’s current condition and supplying him with an alternative mode of understanding the self and the history, one that gives him more control in shaping his political present and future. Born from the “wound” of colonialism,<sup>141</sup> this modernist understanding of history is the only means for the Arab subject to “join the West before revolting on [that West]” (Lee, 1997, 78).

Hanafi agrees with Laroui about colonialism’s detrimental effect on the Arab sense of self, but does not share Laroui’s assumption about the irreversible “rupture” colonialism brought about between Arabs and their past. Nor does he agree with Laroui’s prescription for how the Arab predicament can be overcome. Hanafi understands the relationship between the “Arab self” and its “Western other” to be “perverted, *ghair sawiyya*” because it is a relationship in which

the other innovates while the self emulates, the other produces and the self consumes. Over several generations, this relationship had developed into a superiority complex in the Other and an inferiority complex in the Self whereby the Other is conceived as the eternal teacher and the Self as the eternal student. And since the Other’s creativity always outdoes the Self’s capacity to emulate it, the civilizational gap between them continues to grow, and the emulator remains incapable of catching up with the civilizational wagon... eventually accepting his marginal place in history. (1998, 22-3)

Here, Hanafi alludes to a relationship between the Arab self and the Western Other that is similar to Laroui’s. The Arab self is forever attempting to adopt Western creations (and their attendant epistemologies) but is consistently unable to “catch up” to the West. Whereas Hanafi attributes this failure to the dependent relationship between the West and the Arab, Laroui attributes it to the impossibility of “communication” between the Arab intellectual and the West. Either way, the problem is similar: Arab consciousness continues to be colonized by Western “imports or *wafed*,” so much so that Hanafi (1992) contends that “after national independence, the colonizer had returned through culture,

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<sup>141</sup> Pandolfo identifies Laroui’s understanding of modernity in *Contemporary Arab Ideology* as “an imperative, a wound, and a lure” (122).

and Westernization had spread. The lands were liberated, but the minds colonized” (20-1).

Whereas Laroui generalizes the domination of Arab consciousness by its (obsolete) Western counterpart to apply to Arab society as a whole, Hanafi confines it to a select group of individuals whom he calls the “Westernized minority” (1998, 22). True, Laroui is most concerned with the distorting effect of colonialism on the consciousness of Arab intellectual and political leaders, but he considers the rupture with the historical Arab-Islamic mode of consciousness characteristic of Arab society as a whole. In Laroui’s estimate, the remaining connection with the past is not “real” but an illusion, a ruse begotten by nostalgia and frustration with the present. “The present,” Laroui asserts, “severs our links with the past, one after the other. It forces us to resort to an emotional sense of continuity to replace the objective discontinuity which everyone could see. What connects us to the past? Nothing definite or tangible, except the land we stand upon” (135). By contrast, Hanafi contests this characterization of the connection to the past as the mere construction of a consciousness traumatized by colonial intervention and postcolonial pressure for rapid modernization. For him, the connection to the past is real and has tangible effects for the vast majority of the Arab public—with the exception of the intellectual-political elite, who “since the dawn of the Arab *Nahda* have attempted to modernize Arab society through Westernizing it” (1998, 22). It is this group that has suffered the maladies of a troubled and “alienated” consciousness.<sup>142</sup> Its effect on the broader public, Hanafi seems to imply, has remained marginal precisely because the elites adopt a mode of consciousness antithetical to that of the Arab masses or *jamahir*. While Hanafi sees it as important that the revolutionary intellectual concerns himself with the Westernization of Arab intellectual consciousness, he identifies that intellectual’s primary preoccupation in the social and political condition of the “masses,” whom the Arab intellectual and political leader has hitherto failed to change.<sup>143</sup>

Like Laroui, Hanafi regards “consciousness” as inclusive of the mental, affective, and psychological experiences of the subject. But whereas Laroui regards consciousness as distinct from the material foundations of the subject’s existence (economy and society), Hanafi understands consciousness as an expansive “level of analysis” that includes the “material” and “ideal,” super and infrastructural dimensions of the subject’s experience (1992, 132). Material “reality” exists for Hanafi’s subject only insofar as he is conscious of it, for the “[human or natural] phenomenon is neither material nor ideal, but a consciousness phenomena; the infra and super structures [of the subject’s existence] are unified within the structure of consciousness” (1992, 53). Consciousness is the condition of possibility for grasping (and therefore acting upon) material reality in the first place; it is not derived from that reality, but constitutes it. This inevitably raises the question of how consciousness itself comes to be. While Hanafi does not provide a

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<sup>142</sup> In that context, Hanafi uses the root-similarity between the words for alienation, *ightirab*, and Westernization, *istighrab* (both from the root *gh-r-b*), to note that Westernization is a form of alienation, i.e., a situation in which the self becomes estranged from itself and approximates another, different, self (1992, 20).

<sup>143</sup> In 1992, Hanafi began to write about how “Westernization” could be overcome through “Occidentalism,” or an examination of Western history through non-Western eyes, which he called *muqaddima fi ‘ilm al-istighrab*, or *Introduction to the Science of Occidentalism*. Hanafi never concluded this work, however, and dedicated most of his writings to the reconstruction of the Arab-Islamic heritage or *turath* instead.

theoretical answer to this question, he gives us a historical one: Arab consciousness is primarily constituted by the “ancient Arab-Islamic heritage, *al-turath al-qadeem*,” which in Hanafi’s scheme is comprised of the various disciplines that have developed around revelation (exegesis, jurisprudence, legal theory, theology, philosophy, and mysticism). The role of the “intellectual vanguard” is to engage in the “renewal or *tajdid* of *turath*,” to make it consistent with the need for social and political change. Conceived this way, Hanafi understands the renewal of the Arab *cultural* heritage as “a primarily *political* task” (27; emphasis added).

Hanafi does not locate the Arab subject’s predicament in the non-correspondence between his material condition and his consciousness, as Laroui would contend; rather, the problem of Arab consciousness consists in the formative influence that the ancient modes of consciousness underlying the Arab-Islamic cultural heritage continue to have on its present-day counterpart. Where Laroui starts from the presupposition that “our ties with the Arab Islamic cultural heritage have been severed for the past two centuries” (1996, 12), Hanafi starts with the assumption that those ties persevere into the present and continue to form its inhabitants’ attitudes and disposition towards their society and polity. The materiality of the current Arab condition is not (primarily) formed by colonial and neocolonial interventions that were never grasped by a consciousness infused with a blend of distorted Western values and enduring residues of the traditionalist past; the materiality of the present (its socioeconomic inequality, political oppression, military occupation, etc.) is a consequence of the persistence of hierarchical modes of consciousness that fashion social, economic, and political reality in their own image. Colonial modernity may have disrupted this mode, but it did not fundamentally vanquish it. The emancipation of Arab consciousness, and of Arab reality, hinges upon acknowledging the deep-seated influence of *turath* and of reconstructing it in accordance with the “spirit of the times” (1992, 110).

The “spirit of the times,” for Hanafi as for Laroui, is characteristically modernist. For Laroui, modernity, as a mode of understanding history and of governing society and polity, represents the inescapable destiny of the Arab self ever since its (violent) encounter with the colonial West. Modernity is for Laroui both a “wound and an imperative” (Pandolfo, 2000, 122). Colonialism, had subjected Arab society to exploitation and occupation, but the adoption of the content Western modernity remains the only option before Arab consciousness in the present. The role of the intellectual therefore consists in helping Arab consciousness overcome its dual imprisonment in outdated modes of Western consciousness and the cultural (religious or national) past.

For Hanafi, the reconstruction of *turath* in accordance with the parameters of Western modernity is implied in the way he reinterprets the Islamic tradition. True, Hanafi understands the freedom of will, the ability to make moral judgment, and the participatory mode of political rule and public engagement as inherent to the Arab-Islamic heritage; yet his identification of these particular problems as important, and his particular resolution of them, are animated by a distinctly modernist understanding of freedom, reason, and political autonomy. In this understanding, freedom is conceived as the ability to exercise one’s will freely (without divine mediation) in the natural and human worlds; reason is the ability not only to make moral judgments but to grasp the causal patterns in natural and social behavior in a way that enables human intervention and control; and politics is a realm where members of the community enact their

“collective will or *al-irada al-jama'iyya*,” and where a leader who serves the “public interest or *al-maslaha al-'amma*” can be challenged if he fails to perform that mission (1988, v. 5, 199). True, Hanafi portrays these accounts of freedom, reason, and political rule as in line with “divine intention or *qasd*” as represented in revelation; namely, of religion (revelation) as the divine offering to guide human beings through their lives, and not the lopsided and pervasive understanding of religion as the human’s guide for knowing divine “essence and attributes.” Revelation features a “horizontal relationship” to reality, and is therefore dependent on continuous human interpretation to relate it to that reality; this is not a “vertical relationship” whereby the divine is understood as presiding over and constantly mediating human thought and action (1988, v.1, 83). But Hanafi’s understanding of reason, freedom, and politics as realms of immanent human action, and his subject-centered conception of society and politics, bespeak a distinctly Western modern sensibility.

We find another instance of this modern sensibility in Laroui’s and Hanafi’s understanding of the temporality of Arab consciousness. Both thinkers conceive of a proper sense of time in terms of a forward movement from the past to the present, and from the present to the future, and consider this movement as enacted by human agency. For Laroui, a microcosm of the past, present, and future of humanity finds expression in the history of the West as rendered by Marx. In that understanding, the movement of humanity from one stage to the next ensues from the development of human consciousness as enabled by a transformation in the socioeconomic order. Indeed, Laroui does not believe in the possibility of Arab history mapping exactly onto that of the West. However, he believes in the universal applicability of the thrust of Marx’s historical narrative, i.e. of the historical development of humanity through its passage through successive socioeconomic orders and the corresponding progress these orders bring about in human consciousness. For him, the problem that colonialism inflicts on Arab consciousness is that it renders that consciousness incapable of inhabiting history in a “proper” way. The Arab subject is incapable of living in the “present,” of understanding and engaging with his actual social and political contexts, because he dwells either in the “anterior future” presented by the West—“a condition that we wish will be ours in the future, but which had in fact materialized elsewhere, and that we are not free to reject” (90)—or in the Arab-Islamic “past.” The role of the intellectual is to make Arab consciousness correspond to its social reality, and therefore to make it “present” to itself. Only then would that consciousness be able to propel itself towards its own specific future.

While Hanafi gives us a more “theological” understanding of history as originating in “revelation” and ending in “Judgment Day,” he also conceives of historical movement between these two points as “progressive” (if not always linear), and as conditioned upon human action.<sup>144</sup> Indeed, one of the problems that Hanafi identifies in

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<sup>144</sup> Hanafi (1990) periodizes Arab-Islamic history in seven-century-intervals as follows: The first stage between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> *hijri* centuries (7<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) “witnessed the birth, development, and epitome of Islamic civilizations in the 4<sup>th</sup> *hijri* century before the beginning of its demise with Ghazali’s repudiation of the rational sciences” (34). The second stage, from the 8<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> *hijri* centuries (14<sup>th</sup>- 20<sup>th</sup> AD), comprised the age of regurgitating, explaining and summarizing what that civilization had created in its heyday. The third stage, beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup> *hijri* century (late 20<sup>th</sup> century AD) and extending to the 21<sup>st</sup> *hijri* century, is what Hanafi hopes to be the time when Arab intellectuals “could build on the reform



Arab consciousness is its lack of a “sense of history as a progressive process” in which the historical accumulation of knowledge in human consciousness leads to its movement from one stage to the next (1998, 27). This lack of “historical consciousness,” of history-as-forward-movement, is a result of the absence of such a concept in “our cultural heritage, *al-mawrouth al-thaqafi*” (ibid). Hanafi gives several examples of ancient modes of narrating history, none of which understand history as progress. Ancient historians, he says, “have either studied time without ascribing to it a particular direction, or recounted the history of generations without examining the historical accumulation of knowledge among these generations in a way that would have led to the formation of a historical consciousness” (ibid). In Islamic theology, Hanafi adds, history is conceived as “consistent demise from prophecy to the caliphate [the rule of the first four rulers following Mohamed] to the state of absolute rule...from the best to the worst, from unity to fragmentation” (ibid). Hanafi’s characterization of history in *turath* is reminiscent of Laroui’s: it appears as a collection of incidents without a causal or cumulative effect, and as the “fall” from a prophetic politics and ethics. Crucially, however, Hanafi argues this historiography is not inherent to the Islamic sources (Qur’an and prophetic tradition), but is itself historically produced. “The conception of history as continuous disintegration,” Hanafi tells us, “was generated by feelings of sadness and loss for the strife and disunity that pervaded the Muslim *umma* [after the time of the prophet and the caliphs]. It was then easy [for Muslims of the time] to identify religious texts that spoke to these feelings, so that the psychological experience of Muslims would be compatible with the religious text” (1988, v.5, 319). Accordingly, Hanafi’s reconstruction project involves replacing this understanding of history with another that finds its justification “in text, reality, and reason,” and that sees history as “the progress and awakening (*nahda*) of peoples, and of a movement towards the future” (ibid). Like his “ancient predecessors,” Hanafi finds in Islamic texts and histories evidence of the progressive conception of history that prevails in his own ‘modern’ times.

For Laroui as for Hanafi, the problem of contemporary Arab consciousness is its inability to acquire a proper relationship to history, understood as a forward movement from the past to the present and future. Hanafi calls this quandary the “siege of time, *hisar al-zaman*”:

Arab time is besieged between a past that is still present, and a future that is yearned for, and a present that Arabs do not know how to diagnose or identify. Because Arab time had stopped, nostalgia to the past permeates all cultural and political currents. Islamists are nostalgic for the age of the Caliphate when Muslims were creators of civilization and producers of thought and knowledge. Liberals are nostalgic for liberal Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century, nationalists for the 1950s and 1960s, and Marxists for the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. And while the *salafis* yearn for the past, seculars inhabit a future where society is rational and scientific. A future that leaps over stages and generalizes the experience of the modern West.... It is the present alone that remains unknown. (2008, 13-4)

The standstill of Arab time, its “besieged” status, is a result of the Arab subject’s incapacity to comprehend, or indeed to live in, the present. Instead, he lives in the

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movement that emerged towards the end of the second stage” (35), by which he means the Arab *Nahda* that tentatively lasted from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

“elsewhere, *ailleurs*” of the “Arab past” or the “Western future,” both of which represent an escape from a history that seems to have “stopped.” The role of intellectual activity is to remedy the confused temporality of Arab consciousness, to “break the siege of time through repositioning [that consciousness] from the past and the future to the present moment” (ibid). To do so, the “past” has to be reconstructed to make it responsive to the needs of the present (discernible by the intellectual) and the “future.” Above all, the idealized West has to be given historical specificity, its universality rejected, and its epistemological status transformed from being the “source of knowledge to being its object” (ibid). Only when such a mission is accomplished can Arab consciousness be liberated from its dependency on the “past” and the “future,” and be able to inhabit the “present tense.”

Jabiri is likewise concerned with the Arab subject’s inability to live in the present. Like Laroui, he understands this “defensive” recourse to *turath* as an effect of colonial intervention. The “shock” of the Western encounter, Jabiri (1985) contends, had an “awakening” effect as well as an injurious one on Arab consciousness. The most vibrant intellectual movement in modern Arab history, the Arab *Nahda*, “was born by the shock of confronting an external and threatening power: Western power and its colonial capitalist expansion” (41). Indeed, the dual character of Western presence within the consciousness of the *Nahda* thinkers, as an agent of “awakening” and an inflictor of “threat” and exploitation, is why this consciousness maintains a confused relationship to its past. Sometimes the past is mobilized as a set of “principles that facilitate movement into the future;” other times it is a “place to which the threatened self could resort” (ibid). This ambivalent relationship to the West, Jabiri implies, persists into the present and expresses itself as a “tense and anxious relationship between the past and the future, tradition and modernity, the Self and the Other... a relationship that is based on neither connection nor separation, but on attraction and repulsion, with the result of confusing our vision of the future *nahda* and of adding opacity to our thought” (ibid).

This dual character of the West, as an “enemy and a model,” has an effect not only on the “level of Arab thought and consciousness,” but also on Arab society—on the structure of and parties to the “social conflict” within Arab society. Instead of being a struggle between “forces of change and forces of the status quo, social conflict in the Arab world is also conflict against the West and for it at one at the same time: against its aggression and expansion, and for its liberal values” (ibid). Accordingly, the conflict between social classes in the Arab world is overlain with another layer of relationships that is based on their respective stances towards the West, and with the “general consolidation between the members of the Arab community in their self-defense against external aggression” (42). Like Laroui, Jabiri uses “consciousness” in a distinctly Marxian sense: if reductive. Consciousness is supposed to reflect the materiality of the subject’s condition—the conflict between social forces which is underlain by changes in the modes of production in a particular context. But the West, as an exploitive force and an ideal, continues to distort that consciousness’ understanding of its condition, to mystify its relationship to its “past” and to render opaque its vision for the “future.” The role of the intellectual is to attain a critical awareness of the perverting effect that colonialism had—and that the West continues to have—on the relationship between the Arab self and its past, and to de-mystify and transform this relationship into a “modernizing” or *nahdawi* one. As with Laroui’s and Hanafi’s respective understandings

of history, Jabiri's *nahdawi* relationship to the past entails a distinctly modernist conception of history: the past should cease to influence over the present except as a set of principles that propel the "present" subject into the "future."

For such a transformative process to take place, however, the constitutive effects of the "past" will have to be assessed, critiqued, and transformed. Despite his recognition of the distortive effects of Western colonialism on Arab consciousness, Jabiri, like Hanafi, maintains that the primary constituent of Arab consciousness is the Arab past. The West (as a lure and an imperative) does not produce a particular kind of consciousness; it produces a problematic relationship between consciousness and its history, one in which we do not move beyond the past in order to live in the present, but in which the past continues to live *in* the present, and "the father to live within his son" (Jabiri, 1991, 24). The specific way in which Arab consciousness approaches the world and engages with its social and political reality is primarily determined by its particular historical (social, economic, political, cultural) trajectories. The cultural critic's task is to trace the influence of these trajectories on present Arab consciousness by maintaining a critical distance from his own constitution, and, having done that, by bringing their full implications to light. This is precisely Jabiri's aim in his *Critique of Arab Reason*.

In the *Critique*, Jabiri shifts to the language of "reason" and departs from his earlier quasi-Marxist use of "consciousness." In his understanding, this shift marks a move to "epistemological analysis," considering the influences of the Arab cultural past on the ways in which "Arab reason" approaches the world. As the previous chapter has shown, this examination reveals an Arab reason guided by an "analogical mode of reasoning," which knows the present and the new by analogizing it to its presumed "origin" in the past. This mode of reasoning was elaborated and developed into a sophisticated methodology during the heyday of Islamic learning and knowledge production in the 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, but has since degenerated into a formalistic and "loose" modality that led to the ossification of knowledge, and with it, of Arab theoretical reason. Jabiri's examination of the Arab-Islamic cultural heritage conceives that reason's salvation to lay in a recuperation of Aristotelian demonstrative reason" as it had been assimilated by Muslim philosophers between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Significantly, what Jabiri means to salvage is not Averroesian philosophy as such, but the pillars, the "fundamentals or *usul*," on which that philosophy is based. Indeed, Jabiri's own prescription for how the "past" should be used as a premise for surmounting the (problematic) present can itself be read as an appropriation of the fundamentals of Averroesian philosophy; which features the progress from "premise" to "conclusion." This "forward" movement from premise to conclusion is one that Jabiri contrasts with, and favors over, the epistemology that continues to dominate "Arab reason," an epistemology that derives knowledge about present reality through referring back to an origin in the historical past.

Jabiri's examination of the "past" is not only epistemological; it addresses the constitutive influence of the material conditions of that past. Specifically, Jabiri's *Critique of Political Reason* examines the interplay of economic, social, and ideological factors that he designates as "determinants" of Arab political history (and reason). Jabiri's examination of Arab political history, like his critique of Arab theoretical reason, stops with the early stages of Abbasid rule. It casts the contemporary Arab subject as a product of the persistence of the epistemological and political modalities that emerged

between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Like Hanafi and Laroui, Jabiri assumes that “Arab time” has ground to a halt since then. Also like Laroui and Hanafi, Jabiri understands his role as a cultural critic to be the emancipation of Arab political and cultural subjectivity from its domination by the West and the Past. In contrast to Laroui and Hanafi, however, Jabiri does not do so by identifying contemporary instances of this domination, or by “renewing” the past for contemporary usage; instead, he situates the cultural and political past in its specific context, with the objective of making it “present to itself” (2006, 20). A “modern reading” of *turath* in Jabiri’s estimate entails an interpretation of historical texts as responses to historical problems. He juxtaposes this reading to the “ideological reading” that invests such texts with perennial validity or projects into them problems of the present day. Jabiri finds no contradiction between this “modern” and “objective” approach to *turath* on the one hand, and his expressed “bias” towards “democracy and rationality” on the other. His critique of cultural and political Arab-Islamic history views them as products of their particular time and place but also as having persistent influence on the way the cultural and political subjects understand their present reality. This influence, Jabiri argues, is characterized by political despotism and epistemological irrationality. His reading hopes to produce a historiographically sound narrative of these histories that firmly establishes their relevance to the present Arab condition and its predicament. The soundness of that narrative as well as the purposes for which it is appropriated for the present are defined in accordance with a modernist understanding of history, democracy, and rationality.

In many ways, these thinkers inhabit a pre-postcolonial moment. They are attuned to the problematic influence of colonial intervention on the Arab subject, and they understand Arab subjectivity as historically constituted by a blend of the pre-colonial Arab-Islamic past and the complex impact of the Western encounter. Their critique of colonial and neo-colonial Western intervention does not amount to a critique of Western modernity, however. Their conception of the “Arab future” is animated by a modernist understanding of the modular subject and of the proper experience of temporality. Laroui, Hanafi, and Jabiri all conceive of the “future” Arab subject embracing the modern Western ideals of “freedom, rationality, and democracy”. Whereas Hanafi and Jabiri attempt to define these concepts using local genealogies, Laroui argues unapologetically for the adoption of a Western understanding of history, and of the attendant notions of free will and responsibility.

Coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s, these thinkers inhabited an intellectual moment pervaded by Arab socialist and Third Worldist understandings of historical change that adopted modernity as a decolonizing creed. While they attempt to emancipate Arab consciousness, their conception of that consciousness itself seems to be dominated by very particular understandings of subjectivity, history, and time that have subsequently been problematized by postcolonial studies. An expansion of the current project would evaluate these thinkers’ views in light of the postcolonial moment.

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