

Approaching Modern Muslim Thought

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It is not easy to circumscribe the field of the intellectual history of the modern Islamic world, nor is it immediately clear with what conceptual tools it is best handled. First, contemporary Islamic thought is not institutionally distinguished, as an autonomous academic discipline; it is thoroughly intermingled with various other flows of knowledge. Second, it is far from clear whether Islamic thought can or should be treated in isolation from secular currents of modern thought, be they liberal, nationalist, or Marxist. Third, it remains an open question in how far the intellectual experience of the Islamic world over the last two centuries is radically different, or can even be treated in isolation, from those of, say, South Asia, China, or Africa.

In fact, it displays both an obvious geo- and demographic overlap and a common political experience with all of them: all have witnessed social, political and intellectual modernization under (quasi-) colonial rule followed by a—typically nationalist, populist or even socialist—phase of decolonization and the Cold War, and more recently by what have been called ethnic and religious revivals.

The modernizing Islamic world

Premodern Islamic intellectual history is rather easier to delimit. During the classical Age, ranging roughly from the tenth to the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, the Islamic world knew a relatively clearly delineated field of knowledge, or more generally intellectual activity, subdivided into the two paradigms of, respectively, the Greek/rational and the Arab/traditional sciences. Moreover, legitimate forms of higher learning were generally reproduced through recognized institutions of learning like *madrasas*, in which the individual contact between teacher and student was at least as important as written texts or fixed curricula. As an autonomous discipline, philosophy (*falsafa*, or *hikma*) never acquired an official status in the *madrasas*; but under the guise of logic, theology, and even mysticism, it exerted a lasting formative intellectual influence, especially in Shiite centres of learning. Further, there was a widespread conviction that philosophical and other forms of higher learning were to be the preserve of the educated elites, and should not be divulged to the masses. Last but not least, virtually the entire corpus of premodern Islamic knowledge was written in Arabic.

Starting around the nineteenth century, however, all of this was to change. Gradually, new genres of writing emerged, such as the newspaper article, the novel, and the theatre play; new institutions of education opened, often based on modern English or French curricula; while new forms of language were articulated for expressing new ideas and practices. On the one hand, languages hitherto considered unworthy of communicating higher learning, most notably Turkish, came to be adopted as media of communication and instruction; on the other, classical languages, like Arabic and Persian, underwent drastic changes in vocabulary, syntax, and style. Together, these trends not only increased but radically transformed the reading public. Nor were they merely a matter of slavishly copying Western models and influences: they were at least in part driven by changing domestic concerns of central authority and local opposition.

The intellectual history of the modernizing Islamic world remains relatively isolated from research in related fields, and from theoretical debates elsewhere. In consequence, it remains dominated by modernization-theoretical, nationalist, and secularist assumptions, whether in the guise of liberal or of Marxist-inspired approaches. Alternatively, a genealogical perspective is outlined, which places the rise of the secular nation state in a broader perspective of changing ways of governing, taking neither Western economic or cultural dominance as all-determining, nor individual agency as given. Rather, it systematically focuses on changing relations of power as constitutive of new states, new actors, and new forms of knowledge.

The story of the modernizing Islamic world is highly complex and poorly understood; in the current constellation, there is a particularly pressing need for up-to-date works of synthesis that capture its broader outlines. Over the past decades, valuable studies on cultural and intellectual changes have appeared, but remarkably few attempts at providing comprehensive and accessible overviews. Worse, a focus on individual authors, or a restriction of analyses to specific countries or languages may, despite their inherent value and validity, tend to overlook the large-scale convergences and patterns that transcend national and linguistic boundaries.

Tenacious assumptions

Existing overviews, no matter how good, are by now largely outdated. It may be just a coincidence that in the early sixties, a number of studies appeared in succession, all of which have since established themselves as classics: Albert Hourani's *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (1962), Niyazi Berkes's *Development of Secularism in Turkey* (1964), Bernard Lewis's *Emergence of Modern Turkey* (1961) and Serif Mardin's *Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought* (1962). In retrospect, all of these appear to share some significant, and rather problematic, assumptions. First, to some extent, all proceed from modernization-theoretical assumptions of a progressive and irreversible process of secularization towards a liberal modernity in both the political and the economic sense. Secondly, they insufficiently thematize the nation state and nationalist ideology. Although they are obviously not nationalist in the political sense, they all tend to assume secular modern states and national languages, including distinct language-based cultural traditions, as the inevitable end-point if not a self-evident framework of their analyses.

One of the prime questions to be answered, however, is precisely why it was specific forms of nationalism (rather than, say, Ottomanism, Islamic Modernism, Pan-Islamism, let alone Socialism) that carried the day in the formation of new states in the region, and how religion was rearticulated against the background of these modern states.

Since then, few works of synthesis have appeared concerning the Islamic world as a whole. Exceptions, like Aziz al-Azmeh's important studies in the history of ideas tend to be formulated in diffusionist terms of how various Arab and Islamic movements copied or imitated post-Enlightenment Western models. Such analyses are a useful antidote to the persistent rhetoric of an essentially anti-modern and unenlightened Islam; but they tend to reproduce stereotypes of the Arabo-Islamic world (and more generally the non-Western world) as the mere passive recipient, if not the helpless victim, of a political and intellectual modernity that originated elsewhere. Recently, such widely-held assumptions about modernity as exclusively European in origin have been forcefully challenged by historians like Christopher Bayly.¹

Although most present-day exercises in the intellectual history of the Islamic world clearly derive their analytical categories and indeed their inspiration from political, social and economic history, there have been few attempts to link these respective fields more systematically. Indeed, there seems to be little if any exchange between works in these different areas of specialization. For example, Inalcik and Quataert's voluminous overview of Ottoman social and economic history (1996) is silent on cultural and intellectual developments; and Hourani's *History of the Arab Peoples* (1991) does not even mention the *nahda*, the nine-

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teenth- and twentieth-century Arab literary and cultural renaissance, by name. References to recent research on, for example, South Asia, not to mention theoretical debates, are relatively rare in works on the Middle East. Conversely, theoretical discussions in intellectual history are either silent on the Islamic world, or rely on outdated or one-sided sources of information. Thus, a recent issue of the *Journal of the History of Ideas* (vol. 66, no.2 (2005), devoted to intellectual history in an era of globalization, makes little reference to anything Islamic other than the September 11 assaults.

Consequently, frameworks of modernization theory and Marxist political economy continue to exercise a tenacious influence. Thus, Bernard Lewis's flawed but highly influential overview *What Went Wrong?* (2002) is dominated by modernization-theoretical assumptions and oppositions; and Ibrahim Abu Rabi's *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1968 Intellectual History* (2004) is informed by a vocabulary of imperialism and cultural hegemony. Neither approach is in and of itself invalid or illegitimate; but it may be of more than academic importance to find a way of avoiding the extremes of, or of transcending the antagonisms between, a self-congratulating narrative of liberal and secular modernity and a repetitive if not stagnant oppositional third-worldism. Books like Lewis's and Abu Rabi's are as much theoretical reflections as practical contributions to an ongoing ideological and political struggle. Faced with the apparently inevitable onslaught of world capitalism, and more recently of neoliberal cultural hegemony, it is tempting to deny non-Western subjects all agency; but in fact, actions on all sides appear thoroughly intermingled, and indeed mutually constitutive. Thus, to mention but one example, Ernest Renan's doctoral research on Averroes and Averroism, and his early sojourn in Lebanon, contributed to the shaping of his later views on nationalism, religion, and civilizational progress; his views on Islam were famously discussed (and in part accepted) by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani; and Renan's reading of Averroes has demonstrably shaped both secular and Islamist thinkers in the Arab world, such as Farah Antoun, Muhammad Abduh, and Muhammad Abed al-Jabri.

Because of the pervasive intermingling and interaction between authors from the West and the Muslim world (not to mention complex patterns of migration, especially among academic authors), it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the initially plausible distinctions between objective science and subjective ideology, between professional academic knowledge and local opinion, or between scholarly and practical reason. It therefore makes sense to look beyond ideas or doctrines as either autonomous or self-sufficient entities or as mere reflections of an underlying economic or political logic, and to study them in the context of changing channels and institutions of knowledge production, and of the changing ways of legitimizing and delegitimizing knowledge.

A genealogical approach

It is at this point that we may see what is to be gained from a genealogical mode of analysis, that is, an approach that looks at the changing ways in which knowledge is involved in changing practices of exercising—and resisting—power. Such a genealogical approach, pioneered by Michel Foucault, cannot be straightforwardly operationalized for the Islamic world, however: what Foucault has to say about the Islamic world is either deeply problematic (witness his much-misunderstood writings on the Iranian revolution), or inexplicably absent (witness his silence regarding French colonial rule over Algeria). More recently, authors like Talal Asad have been trying to open genealogical perspectives on the modern Muslim world.²

It may be useful to determine what is central to a genealogical perspective. First, unlike Marxist approaches, it does not proceed from an assumed cleavage between economic base and economic superstructure, but questions how such distinctions emerged historically, especially through changing practices of government. Neither does it treat "ideology" as necessarily false or distorting, and as opposed to some power-free objective scientific truth; rather, it assumes that *all* forms of knowledge and truth are constituted by relations of power. Most importantly, it takes power not as repressive or negative, but as productive of both knowledge and actors. Thus, new vocabularies created by pioneers like Rifa'a al-Tahtawi in Cairo and Ibrahim Shinasi not only helped in thinking about or describing a rapidly changing social reality; in a very real sense, they helped in bringing it about. Thus far, the Arabic literary renaissance or *nahda* has been studied primarily



Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, Oxford, 1962; Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, Oxford, 1962; Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, Montreal, 1964.

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by philologists and literary historians rather than scholars working in intellectual history but its intellectual and even political implications went far beyond literary circles. It is hard to overemphasize the lasting and irreversible effects of such work in cultural translation.

Second, a genealogical approach need not proceed from the assumption that all of modernity was imported or imposed from the side of the imperialist West, or that all non-Western action in this process was a matter of either adaptation and collaboration, or of resistance and contestation; rather, it opens the question of what *kinds* of agency were shaped and constituted by processes of modernization. Thus, new local elites and intelligentsia were constituted by new practices of education, publishing, and government playing various new, and highly contested, roles in the intellectual developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, increasingly writing and speaking as rights-bearing citizens rather than the ruler's subordinates.

Third, genealogical approaches focus not on individuals or institutions, but on practices; moreover, they raise questions of how these practices are justified by different kinds of norms, and how they are constituted by different kinds of power. In this way, a more differentiated account of various new forms of non-academic and unofficial "amateur knowledge," produced by lay intellectuals, comes into view.

The proof of the utility of such methodological innovations lies, or course, in their practical value in raising new questions, and in providing new answers. This is not the place for such an evaluation; but it may be that among the more interesting insights to be gained from a genealogical approach is, on the one hand, an awareness of similar or converging patterns across national boundaries, and between thinkers conventionally labelled "Islamic" and "secular"; and on the other, a more thorough questioning of the framework of the nation-state than has hitherto been undertaken.

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Notes

1. Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, 2nd ed. (Verso, 1996); C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Blackwell, 2004).
2. Cf., most famously, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Random House, 1977); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).