



Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab. *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspectives.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 512 S. \$32.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-14489-6.



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Here, we have a book that seems inspired by conversations around a kitchen table, somewhere in Lebanon, following the 1967 war contemplating the magnitude of the defeat and the relevance of cultural heritage to the Arab experience of modernity. Indeed, Elizabeth Kassab retrieves the topic of this stimulating book from her childhood memories, tying scattered conversations to invoke concerns about the meaning of modernity (*hadatha*) and Enlightenment (*tanwir*) in today's Arab world.

For more than a century, the quest to understand modernity has dominated public discussions, and the relentless and constant search for solid cultural grounding, selfhood, or for lack of a better word, orientation, is a hallmark of Arab modernity. This has included hundreds of Arab intellectuals writing thousands of books, convening dozens of conferences and symposia, and giving birth to a full-fledged intellectual tradition. Though politically disenfranchised, the intellectual output of this network can be easily identified in reflections, debates, and deliberations in most

Arab news organizations, periodicals, journals, newspapers, and blogs. Kassab, a Lebanese intellectual historian and a research fellow at the German Orient Institute in Beirut, proves capable of making sense of these academic exchanges.

Kassab is at home in the Arab intellectual tradition which she writes about with great clarity and insight. Her francophone Lebanese and Moroccan focus is a fresh corrective to the otherwise Egypto-centric emphasis. Indeed, notwithstanding the justified mainstream focus on Egyptian radical Islam, Kassab's heroes are critical secular thinkers such as George Tarabichi, Sadek al-'Azm, Qunstantin Zurayq, and Muhammad 'Abid al-Jabiri, who all lost the battle for political freedoms in the context of an anti-intellectual authoritarian state.

Due to the diversity of their thought Kassab's book has no single overarching argument but instead offers an extensive mapping of key debates, foundational texts, and intellectual circles. Taken as a whole, it is a real manual for delineating con-

temporary Arab thought regarding the 1967 war and how it still haunts Arab culture.

A number of scholars concur with the popular wisdom that this brief war brought to an end the unitary project of Pan-Arabism and terminated a secular cultural outlook which was replaced with the embracing of religion and the rise of political Islam. Yet this assessment offers only a superficial explanation of the dramatic cultural and intellectual effects of 1967. This is because if Pan-Arab nationalism nicely captures the dynamics of the inter-Arab quest for political unity, it is not a strong analytical category and ignores culture. While Western scholarship is still stuck with the antiquated trajectory of Pan-Arab failures replaced by Islamic fundamentalism, contemporary Arab intellectuals long ago shifted the discussion to more nuanced and critical domains. Dealing exclusively with the 1967 war and its legacy, this rich body of scholarship is known as contemporary Arab thought (*fikr mu'asir*). Kassab's book makes sense of this tradition through a critical survey of the field. Exposing its complexity, she composes a solid yet modest investigation of what she defines as the post-1967 "cultural malaise."

Comprised of six chronologically organized chapters, Kassab's study begins with the period of modern Arab thought from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century known as the *nahda*, or renaissance. Kassab rightly points out the centrality of political justice, science, religion, the rise and fall of civilizations, and the status of women in a rather standard narration of the movement. In contrast with Albert Hourani's classic, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (1962), which argued that the *nahda* came to an end in 1939, Kassab sides with intellectuals such as Moroccan philosopher Abdallah Laroui, who maintains that the *nahda* continued until 1967. Indeed, unlike Western scholars, Arab intellectuals often speak of several *nahdawi* projects with different periodizations, suggesting, for instance, the existence of a second *nahda* between 1939 and 1967.

Chapter 2 offers a strong review of the Arab self-critique of 1967 as a staging point for the more systematic and scholarly engagements that began in the 1970s and which are explored in chapter 3. Chapters 4 and 5 review the critique of Arab culture in Islamic theology and secular thought and commendably include such neglected intellectuals as Hassan Hanafi, Fuad Zakariyya, Muhammad Jabr al-Ansari, and `Aziz al-Azmeh. Chapter 6, in a rather surprising detour, seeks to "break the postcolonial solitude" of the Arabs through a discussion of cultural malaise both in and outside of the West, including, for example, Latin America. Kassab distills the leitmotifs and specificities of the Arab postcolonial experience and calls for shifting priorities from "identity to democracy," from "essentialism to agency," and from "ideology to critical thinking" (pp. 344-346). As it turns out, these are also some of the fundamentals for a potential third *nahda*, a discussion of which concludes the book.

Though Kassab casts her net widely, reviewing countless intellectual biographies and numerous hair-splitting arguments in inter-Arab conferences, the major contribution of her work is her explanation for why the '67 defeat ushered a shift toward religiosity and cultural metaphysics. Towards this end she investigates the formation of two key concepts in post-'67 Arab thought: tradition (*turath*) and authenticity (*asala*).

Between national independence and 1967 public life was characterized by grand projects of development, epic thinking, and a cultural optimism which bordered on the utopian. The majority of Arab urban populations rode this wave, but after the shock of the 1967 defeat there emerged a critique of Arab culture, a climate of self-condemnation, and the question of what direction culture should take. One of these new directions was towards Islam, though this was already present during the *nahda* as demonstrated by people like Sayyid Qutb and others hoping for a collective return to—or rather reinvention of—the glories of an

unadulterated early Islam. Since 1967, the Islamist emphasis on tradition (*turath*) and authenticity (*asala*) has garnered an increasing following and served as the focal point for contemporary debates. Already in the early 1970s, the drama of Arab thought revolved around the moral, psychological, and even philosophical attractiveness of this new kind of religiosity (not simply religion itself). Even as they countered this metaphysical return to the fictional authenticity of the seventh century, secular thinkers sought to gain a deep understanding of Islamic religiosity.

Kassab discusses the writings of intellectuals such as the Lebanese humanist Qustantin Zurayq, a staunch believer in the universality of Europe's historical experience who proposed that the so-called revolution of reason was "the authentic revolution that can lead the Arab peoples toward development and solidarity" (p. 70). His solution was to employ critical history by reintroducing the nineteenth-century idea of historicism. For Zurayq, a "historicizing" individual could grasp his or her environment as the outcome of concrete historical processes and thus dispel the unrealistic metaphysical ideal of a peaceful return to the "pristine" past of early Islam. Kassab also considers Zurayq's contemporary, Moroccan philosopher Abdallah Laroui, who shared Zurayq's concerns and also insisted upon thinking in critical historical terms. Egyptian philosopher Fouad Zakariyya concurred with their analysis and warned against the Islamist "ahistorical exaggeration of the past" (p. 126). Still, such scattered writing was not a match for what Kassab considers an inflation in religious authority.

Kassab's book is most illuminating in its analysis of how these secular intellectuals realized that they did not fully understand why fundamentalism was so psychologically attractive. Moroccan literary critic Muhamamd Barada, for example, wondered who had presented the Arab public with the choice between modernity (*hadatha*) and authenticity (*asala*). One response held that

Sayyid Qutb--or rather Qutubism--had reframed the meaning of being religious in terms of authenticity. However, the prolific Moroccan philosopher Muhammad `Abd al-Jabiri argued that colonial Europe was to blame for presenting modernity and tradition as mutually exclusive. Summarizing the various debates on the issue, Kassab argues that "most Arab critical thinkers agree that *turath* and the idea of authenticity associated with it are the last, desperate resort of pride and hope after a century of disasters and in the face of an unbearable present" (p. 169).

Kassab juxtaposes their views with those of Paris-based Syrian philosopher George Tarabichi, who argued that "never before had Arabs turned so emphatically to their cultural legacy (i.e., to the *turath*) as they did after 1967" (p. 167). For Tarabichi, the impact of these events on Arab consciousness was so significant that they could not be grasped in standard historical terms but required a psychoanalytic approach to explain why fundamentalism was psychologically attractive. He considered the defeat devastating because it occurred during a time of confidence and was entirely unexpected. It was a cultural defeat that profoundly damaged the foundations of the state, the nation, and the self. In addition, the memory of the defeat was so powerful that it could not be overcome by any subsequent accomplishment. Thus, "on the subconscious level," this great trauma "was lived as the shameful loss by and of the father, personified in the Egyptian, Arab and Third World leader Gamal Abdel Nasser," whose defeat and subsequent death were "felt as a deep humiliation and a tremendous loss. An orphaned nation had to mourn a humiliated and castrated father" (pp. 166-167). This humiliation was accompanied by guilt, and the feeling that the *nahda* was "a betrayal of tradition, Islam and authenticity" (p. 168). The legacy of the past, *turath*, became the new ersatz father whose powers could restore pride, self-confidence, a sense of direction, and success.

Kassab gives credit to Arab feminists such as Nawwal al-Sa`dawi for knitting together these disparate lines of thinking. A physician-turned-critical writer, al-Sa`dawi's publications deal with the unjust existential condition of women, and the broader circumstances that came to bear on Arab existence. As she put it: "I realized the connection between the liberation of women and the liberation of the country.... I understood the connections between sex, politics, economics, history, religion and morality. This might be why my writing led me to the loss of my position in the government and to prison, to the confiscation of my books and to my being black-listed" (p. 93). Women's bodies, rights, and psyches were most influenced by the tribulations of 1967 (a topic which deserves a separate study). Ultimately, Kassab shows how this feminist perspective and its century-long critique of patriarchy as the organizational logic of public life influenced several mainstream writers such as Palestinian philosopher Hisham Sharabi.

Kassab's book cannot do justice to the intellectual history of the last two decades, where new issues such as individualized ritualistic death, also known as suicide bombing, require new perspectives for analyzing Arab subjectivity. It is also doubtful that post-1967 Arab thought could be joined into one coherent narrative, when it is sharply divided on the ground. If there is one area where Kassab misses the mark, it is her discussion of the *nahda* in the first chapter. Rather than capitalizing on the more recent, rich tradition of postcolonial studies, she invokes Hourani's classic yet outdated liberal perspective of progressive cultural betterment. This approach fails to expose the *nahda*'s main flaw: although it always presented itself as a harmonious modern experience, in truth it was a schizophrenic and bifurcated cultural condition that bounced back and forth between dichotomous modes of being--Eastern/Western, rational/spiritual, European/Islamic, rising/declining, and civilized/barbarian. As a post-colonial experience, post-1967 Arab thought directly emerges from this condition and hence it is

critical to acknowledge the problematic attributes of the *nahda* early on, rather than treating it as "background." Given Kassab's time frame and focus this is indeed a relatively minor drawback to an otherwise outstanding contribution that does an excellent job of exposing the self-analysis of contemporary Arab culture.

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