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Rethinking Arab Intellectual History: Epistemology, Historicism, Secularism

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Arab intellectual history has been experiencing a resurgence of late, positioned as it is between the ascendancy of global intellectual history and the continued resilience of area studies. Such a precipitous conjuncture has led to a proliferation of Arab intellectual histories that belie the orientalist fallacy of the region as a "no idea producing area," as once infelicitously described by Charles F. Gallagher.[1] And yet the task of scholars of the Arab world is surely more complex than merely adding intellectuals and writers who have heretofore been ignored to the catalogue of intellectual history.

Despite the growth in global intellectual history, one might argue that the larger field of intellectual history has yet to grapple fully with its geohistorical and geopolitical location; Western European intellectual traditions remain central in the formation of its canon. Within these intellectual formations, the non-West often makes its appearance only as an afterthought—producing exemplars but rarely epistemologies.[2] This is evidenced in citational practices in which theoretical production is presumed to be European, while sites like Morocco, Egypt, and Syria can only inflect the empirical trajectories of intellectual movements presumed to have already taken place in the West. Given this framing (how), one might ask, can Arab intellectual history shift the contours of debates within intellectual history itself?

Such a task is by no means insignificant, particularly given the fact that, in the late twentieth century, "works on intellectual history proper remain in the scholarly peripheries of Middle Eastern studies" and works on cultural history have "failed to achieve the status of an identifiable sub-discipline on par with social, economic, or political history."[3] For historians of the non-West, intellectual history has been viewed at times as a rarefied subfield that has no place in their work, and junior

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[1] Cited in Hosam Aboul-Ela, "The Specificities of Arab Thought: Morocco since the Liberal Age," in Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present* (Cambridge, 2018), 143–62, at 145.

[2] Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel, "Area Impossible: Notes toward an Introduction," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22/2 (2016), 151–71, at 152.

[3] Israel Gershoni and Amy Singer, "Introduction: Intellectual History in Middle Eastern Studies," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28/3 (2008), 383–9, at 383; Kevin Martin, "Middle East Historiography: Did We Miss the Cultural Turn?" *History Compass* 12/2 (2014),

scholars are often encouraged to write materialist histories from below. In the case of Middle East history, this has been compounded by a tendency to emphasize the region as principally defined by the political, whether in terms of wars and conflicts, or, in the aftermath of the revolutionary uprisings of 2011, in terms of the politics of the present. Such a narrow remit has not encouraged more imaginative intellectual and cultural histories.

 Israel Gershoni has noted a variety of reasons for this neglect of intellectual history, namely

> the flight from any type of elitist history, certainly from the history of ideas produced by intellectual luminaries; the continued avid interest in "history from below," both socioeconomic and sociocultural; the ongoing emphasis on political history and the history of political economy, world systems, and dependency theory; the reception and emulation of postmodernist and postcolonial paradigms and their application to the study of nonelitist groups; the growth of women's studies and the history of gender,

as well as the perception of intellectual history as marking "a direct continuation of the overtextualism and philological hermeneutics that marked classical Oriental studies, against which *Orientalism* brilliantly inveighed."[4]

 All of this makes the contemporary resurgence of Arab intellectual history, as illustrated by two volumes edited by Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss on *Arabic Thought*, all the more remarkable.[5] What has led to the recent revival of intellectual history? One way to answer this might be to consider the maturation of postorientalist historiography; it has been over half a century since Anouar Abdel-Malek's groundbreaking "Orientalism in Crisis," and four decades since the 1978 publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*.[6] In the years prior to *Orientalism*, historians had already begun to underscore the need for a focus on the internal dynamics of Middle Eastern societies and engaged in Marxist and political-economy approaches, as well as studies of nationalism and of nonelite or marginalized groups such as peasants, workers, and women.[7]

 As scholars have argued, Said's critique was a double-edged sword.[8] On the one hand, Said's comparative contrapuntal method was critiqued as being ahistorical

178–86, at 178. Gershoni and Singer note (at 384) the complete absence, at the time of their writing, of Middle East intellectual history in major professional journals such as the *Journal of the History of Ideas*.

[4]Israel Gershoni, "The Theory of Crisis and the Crisis in a Theory: Intellectual History in Twentieth-Century Middle Eastern Studies," in Israel Gershoni, Amy Singer and Y. Hakan Erdem, eds., *Middle East Historiographies: Narrating the Twentieth Century* (Seattle, 2006), 131–82, at 132.

[5]Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge, 2016); Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*.

[6]Anouar Abdel-Malek, "Orientalism in Crisis," *Diogenes* 11/44 (1963), 103–40; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978). The critique of orientalism was not the singular achievement of Edward Said; for more on Said's precursors and interlocutors see the discussion of Aboul-Ela below.

[7]Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge, 2004), 148–81.

[8]Reviews of Said have been exhaustively covered elsewhere. See Edward Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered," *Cultural Critique* 1 (1985), 89–107; Lata Mani and Ruth Frankenburg, "The Challenge of

and apolitical and, some maintained, it denied local actors the agential capacity to represent or transform their own societies.[9] *Orientalism*, they noted, was a polemic that did not create an alternative framework. At the same time, its impact was "difficult to exaggerate" and, according to Peter Gran, it "was so influential it brought on a crisis, one which is still with us today."[10] The book "put establishment Middle East studies on the defensive," leading to an engagement with postcolonial theory in history, anthropology, and literature—although this was more widely represented in South Asian studies.[11] It thus spawned a multitude of critiques of orientalist taxonomies within Western and Arab thought.[12] Colonial and postcolonial discourse analysis initially prevailed as scholars avoided the excessively textualist and philological histories of an earlier generation, such as the magisterial intellectual history written by Albert Hourani in 1962, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (the inspiration behind the aforementioned edited volumes).[13] Subsequently, new specializations emerged, such as the spatial turn; environmental history; studies of ethnic, racial, and religious minorities; and gender and sexuality studies—all of which were attuned to power relations, broadly understood.[14]

This new historiography was coupled with developments within the region, namely the demise of and disenchantment with postcolonial state projects and the ever-increasing relevance of counterhegemonic thought, both Islamist and, to a lesser extent, leftist. A more sustained engagement with the vibrant intellectual currents dominant in the region led to an increase in histories of the Arab left, alongside the study of contemporary Islamic thought—studies that increased exponentially in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution.[15] In conjunction with the

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Orientalism," *Economy and Society* 14/2 (1985), 174–92; Gyan Prakash, "Orientalism Now," *History and Theory* 34/3 (1995), 199–212; Lockman, *Contending Visions*, 192–201.

[9]Sadiq Jalal al-ʿAzm, "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse," *Khamsin* 8 (1981), 5–26; Aijaz Ahmad, "Between Orientalism and Historicism," *Studies in History* 7/1 (1991), 135–63; Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London, 1992), 159–220; Lockman, *Contending Visions*, 195–9.

[10]Lockman, *Contending Visions*, 183; Peter Gran, "*Orientalism*'s Contribution to World History and Middle Eastern History 35 Years Later," in Ziad Elmarsafy, Anna Bernard and David Attwell, eds., *Debating Orientalism* (Basingstoke, 2013), 18–37, at 18.

[11]Timothy Mitchell, "The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science," in David Szanton, ed., *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (Berkeley, 2004), 74–118, at 97.

[12]Fadi Bardawil parses the post-Saidian moment in terms of a metropolitan–regional divide "which saw the emergence of a fork in intellectual and critical agendas among Arab intellectuals. In the wake of Said, some, mostly residing in the Metropoles, would go on to criticize their colleagues for importing Orientalist taxonomies into their thought, while others would latch onto the universal impulse of Marxism and Liberalism, at times turning their analytical gaze inwards to examine the culture and social structures of their own societies." Fadi Bardawil, "Sidelining Ideology: Arab Theory in the Metropole and Periphery, circa 1977," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*, 163–80, at 178.

[13]Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1789–1939* (Cambridge, 1983; first published 1962).

[14]Martin, "Did We Miss the Cultural Turn?", 179–80.

[15]See, for instance, the forum "Toward New Histories of the Left," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51/2 (2019), 301–19. For examples of synthetic intellectual histories that integrate the history of the left and Islamic thought see Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabiʿ, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London, 2004); Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Political Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 2009).

rise of global intellectual history, historians turned to a contextualism that situated Arab thought within social, economic, and political developments.[16] Innovative approaches emerged that combined attention to the dynamics of colonialism and postcolonial state projects, alongside a concern for intellectual history "proper."

In what follows, I examine some of the recent work in Arab intellectual history, teasing out common concerns from essays in the two volumes of *Arabic Thought* in order to show how such histories might transform and reinvigorate debates within intellectual history. I work outward from the essays themselves in order to engage wider issues of concern to all intellectual historians. In particular, I address the vexing question of how specific non-Western intellectuals might best be thought of as generating epistemologies for modern social theory, rather than as mere exemplars of Arab thought. Similarly, how might a periodization detached from the itineraries of European thought enable the exploration of the multiple temporalities inhabited by Arab intellectuals? I then turn to the question of problem-spaces or the discursive contexts that Arab thinkers have inhabited across different generations. This launches us into a wide-ranging debate over method. How is context, and ought it to be, understood within intellectual history? I explore rival models for reading context, namely historicist models that emphasize contrapuntal sociopolitical settings, inspired by the work of Edward Said, and archival models that draw on the work of Talal Asad and embed texts within the *longue durée* of discursive traditions. Perhaps unexpectedly, the question of method raises the nettlesome issue of secularism and the ethical turn within certain strands of contemporary scholarship.

Epistemologies or Exemplars?

The geopolitics of knowledge production, as embodied in the distinction between theory and thought, is one that has often gone unexamined within intellectual history. What makes one intellectual the originator of theoretical models and another an object of study and producer of thought? Does such a distinction, and attendant division of labor, fall along the timeworn lines of metropole and former colony? And if so, what avenues are open to us for reconsidering the epistemological imperialism that relegates theory production to the Western academy and the history of thought to the non-West? I suggest that we place naive ideas of provenance in question, troubling the notion of a singular West that can be presumed to have produced Western theory and an East that can be said to have forged Arab thought.

Hosam Aboul-Ela drives this point home by directing our attention to "the core–periphery divide that lies at the heart of global theoretical discourses" in which Arab thinkers are objects of study rather than theorists.[17] As he notes,

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[16]Lockman, *Contending Visions*, 201–14. In some instances, this new historiography was connected to the brute material fact of the inaccessibility of postcolonial archives in the region—an obstruction that may, ideally, open the way for more creative histories of the postwar period. Nevertheless, the practice of intellectual history has always existed as a subterranean force in the field of Middle East studies, often emanating from disciplines outside history, such as comparative literature, political theory and, above all, Islamic and religious studies. This is evident in the edited volumes at hand as well, where a fair number of contributors come from disciplines outside history.

[17]Aboul-Ela, "The Specificities of Arab Thought," 160, 144.

A theorist is someone who produces systems and methods that help shape our thinking. In this sense, the Arab world appears to have no theorists. Intellectuals, on the other hand, have bodies, belong to social classes, and are products of their moment and their region. In the case of Arab intellectuals, they may even be said to be incarcerated in their bodies, their regions, and their times.[18]

He suggests, instead, that the "challenge for historians and comparativists alike, is to forge a disciplinary contrapuntalism that is capable of reading intellectuals as if they were theorists, and to read theorists as if they were intellectuals."[19]

To accomplish this, Aboul-Ela brings in North Africa not as the mere addition of empirical knowledge, but as a conduit for rethinking the binaries of tradition and modernity. He provides the example of the Moroccan philosopher Muhammad al-Jabiri (b. 1935), who erased the modern–liberal, traditional–conservative divide while imagining the heterogeneity of the region. North Africa serves as a platform, as well, for critiquing the relationship of the Arab world with the West—rethought first by Muhammad Husayn Haykal (b. 1888) in the 1920s and 1930s and later by Abdallah Laroui (b. 1933) in the 1960s. Aboul-Ela's discussion of the early critiques of orientalism and Western metaphysics performed by Arab scholars is instructive, first, because it anticipates "the famous critique of Orientalist discourse launched by Edward W. Said, which has so pervasively influenced postcolonial studies, literary criticism, and the study of the Middle East in North America, even as it erased Laroui (and other interlocutors) from its semantic field of engagement," and second, because *Orientalism* can be distinguished from earlier scholarship in its "persistent avoidance of any agency, voice, or narration coming back against Orientalist discourse."[20] Instead, Aboul-Ela provides us with an intellectual genealogy that "links Arab agency to critique at every turn."[21]

Likewise, Fadi Bardawil emphasizes the production of Arab theory across the space of metropole and (post-)colony. He asks, "*what* counts as Arabic thought or *who* counts as an Arab intellectual in the genealogies constructed by intellectual historians"?[22] Placing the exilic and the autochthonous side by side, Bardawil asks us to contemplate who is a "theorist" and who is an "autochthonous" intellectual. Attending to different geographical sites, languages, and audiences, he argues that we must include diasporic and exilic Arab intellectuals—for example, those who suffered forced displacement, as well as those seeking refuge from authoritarian regimes and murderous dictatorships—within the same tradition of contemporary Arab thought in order to produce new intellectual genealogies.[23] He writes,

A failure to do so, one that eschews seriously engaging the ramifications of the increasing dispersion of Arab thinkers, risks reproducing a (post)colonial division of intellectual labor by relegating thinkers located in the periphery to the

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[18]Ibid., 161.
[19]Ibid., 162.
[20]Ibid., 154, 157.
[21]Ibid., 161.
[22]Bardawil, "Sidelining Ideology," 179, original emphasis.
[23]Ibid., 179–80.

status of objects of study while those in the metropole may be subjects of conversation, colleagues to be engaged or theorists whose work would not be historicized but used as a paradigmatic conceptual arsenal. Who is the "theorist"? And who is an "indigenous" intellectual? … What are the different weights attributed to different discourses? Which ones are *still* taken to be local, rooted and representative of a society? And which ones are slicker, frequent-fliers and members of a more abstract theoretical club with universal aspirations and applications?[24]

Bardawil returns us, once again, to the looming figure of Edward Said (b. 1935), placing him side by side with the lesser known Waddah Charara (b. 1942), a political sociologist and leading theorist of the Lebanese New Left, in order to fold in diasporic histories into the traditions of Arab thought. Bardawil deftly demonstrates the way in which the critical interventions of these thinkers in the late 1970s represented a crucial moment in which the ideological plane was sidelined in favor of the sociological (Charara) and the discursive (Said).[25] More specifically, Charara, in the early years of the Lebanese civil wars and regional wars (1975–1990), developed "a sociological mode of analysis … [that] posited the *primacy* of the social fabric and highlighted the logics structuring its relations of solidarity (regional, familial and sectarian) over and above the ideological divide separating the warring parties of the day."[26] Edward Said's *Orientalism*, on the other hand, "pitched its critique at the epistemological strata, articulating the political at the level of the discursive infrastructures of thought, and arguing that both radical thinkers, such as Karl Marx, and right-wing intellectuals inhabit a common Orientalist matrix despite their major ideological differences."[27]

Said's epistemological critique and Charara's sociological register were thus structurally homologous critiques and analyses, positing "a common ground upon which apparent ideological polar opposites are more deeply unified" while "unmasking a *particular* shrouding itself in *universal* garb."[28] At the same time, Bardawil argues, the mid- to late 1970s represent a divergence that takes place in the critical agendas of Arab intellectuals, divided between those, mostly residing in the West, who engage in postcolonial critique and those who turned their gaze inwards toward a critique of their own societies and cultures.[29]

Drawing our attention to the geopolitics of knowledge production and the artificial divide constructed between theorists and intellectuals, Aboul-Ela attempts to close this gap by emphasizing the temporal dimensions of knowledge production and the often hidden genealogical sequencing of ideas (Abdel-Malek–Laroui–Said) that displaces metropolitan theorists as the sole originators of critique and embeds them instead within earlier Arab critical traditions of thought, while Bardawil emphasizes contemporaneous intellectual movements dispersed over geographical space (Said–Charara). Taken together, they challenge us to

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[24]Ibid., 180, original emphasis.
[25]Ibid., 165–6.
[26]Ibid., 166, original emphasis.
[27]Ibid.
[28]Ibid., 177, original emphasis.
[29]Ibid., 166, 177–8.

reconceptualize the "sources, settings, and epistemes" of Arab intellectual history as theoretical and epistemological innovations, rather than as mere exemplars of patterns that have already taken place elsewhere.[30]

Multiple Temporalities

If scholars have decentered Europe as the source of epistemological innovation within understandings of Arab intellectual history, so too have they unsettled the temporal foundations of its modernity. The *nahda* is a term that refers to the efflorescence of cultural–literary production in the long nineteenth century in tandem with the rise of new intellectual groups, sociocultural formations, and cultural institutions; transformations in language; and the emergence of new genres of writing that renegotiated tradition and modernity.[31] Recent writing has both pluralized and relocated the *nahda* as an emblem of Arab modernity; it has pluralized it through the inclusion of minor genres and it has decentered it by dissociating it from the allegedly salvific presence of Europe. In an older literature, Arab modernity was thought to have been inaugurated by the 1798 Napoleonic invasion of Egypt, the growth of educational missions to Europe, and the dissemination of French Enlightenment thought. Instead, Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss resituate the narrative and the periodization of the *nahda* by drawing on Peter Gran's groundbreaking, if undervalued, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism*, in which the modern Arabic cultural–literary revival was shown to be rooted in the eighteenth-century religious revivals, specifically the revival of *tariqa* Sufism and Hadith studies.[32]

In this line of thinking, then, the *nahda* no longer appears as a repetition of earlier European enlightenment thought, nor is its innovation assumed to issue from its wholesale rejection of traditional modes of thought. Rather, as Marilyn Booth skillfully shows, writers "still lived in their inherited world of thought … [and aimed to] preserve the continuity of its tradition," while simultaneously engaging new modes of European writing.[33] What sets Booth's work apart from much of Arab intellectual history is her attention to what she terms the "underbrush" of textual

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[30] Arondekar and Patel, "Area Impossible," 152.

[31] Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, "Preface," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age*, xv–xx; Hanssen and Weiss, "Notes on Transliteration and Translation," in ibid., xxi–xxii; Hanssen and Weiss, "Introduction: Language, Mind, Freedom and Time: The Modern Arab Intellectual Tradition in Four Words," in ibid., 1–37. They refer to the *nahda* as nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Arab intellectual history (xxi) and as "a historical archive of the contemporary Arab intellectual" (xvi) and note that the term is more aptly rendered as a "rising up" rather than the traditional translations of "awakening" or "renaissance" (1). Crucially, they track the reemergence of the *nahda* as a theme in wider Arabic public discourse in the postwar period (4–8). The literature on the *nahda* is vast and highly specialized. For synthetic works see Shaden Tageldin, "Proxidistant Reading: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of the *Nahḍa* in U.S. Comparative Literary Studies," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43/2–3 (2012), 227–68; Stephen Sheehi, "Towards a Critical Theory of al-Nahḍa: Epistemology, Ideology and Capital, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43/2–3 (2012), 269–98. For remarkable rereadings of the *nahda* archive that place it within alternate temporal frameworks see Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (New York, 2013); Jeffrey Sacks, *Iterations of Loss: Mutilation and Aesthetic Form, Al-Shidyaq to Darwish* (New York, 2015).

[32] Peter Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760–1840* (Austin, 1979); Hanssen and Weiss, "Introduction: Language, Mind, Freedom and Time," 30–32.

[33] Albert Hourani, as cited by Marilyn Booth, "Liberal Thought and the 'Problem' of Women," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age*, 187–213, at 188, 191.

production rather than "more elevated discourse."[34] By focusing on lesser known authors and venues, rather than luminary figures, she directs us to a vibrant public arena in which the discursive management of gender and sexuality took center stage. How might, she asks, attention to understudied kinds of texts (popular novels, conduct manuals, and biographies) that "operate on an entirely different plane of discourse" highlight "gender as an organizational foundation of society"?[35] Specifically, Booth explores a hybrid didactic novel written by two medical students and a conduct manual on marriage practices addressed to the Muslim believer. She does so in order to elucidate how discourses on gender were communicated to mass audiences and thus required a particular mode of address, engaging at times the male (as father, husband) and other times the female (as mother, wife) reader in securing heteronormative ideals of marriage and family.

Like Booth, Sherene Seikaly tackles discourses that targeted their audiences in a didactic fashion, addressing everyday behaviors, embodied practices, and modes of sociability. In particular, she explores the role of "Men of Capital" in the discovery and invention of the economy as a self-contained object and "science of the self" during the British Mandate in Palestine.[36] A capitalist individual emerged as authors "sought to shape an ethical economic subject," demonstrating that economics was not just a disciplinary formation or a rational science, but also a means to lead readers towards new embodied practices, forms of desire, and capacities for ethical action and consumption.[37] Surveying the journal al-Iqtisadiyyat al-'Arabiyya (the Arab Economic Journal), she elaborates on the power and limitations of the economy as a site of social management that inaugurated new conceptual grammars, but above all highly gendered social characters: social man, the man of capital, and two contrasting Palestinian women, the spendthrift urbanite (al-musrifa) and the judicious woman (al-hasifa).[38] Writers made their case for ethical consumption by drawing upon older thinkers, such as the ninth-century polymath al-Jahiz (b. c.776) and the medieval theologian al-Ghazali (b. 1058), as well as the canon of political economy and its critique as found in Adam Smith (b. 1723) and Karl Marx (b. 1818).[39]

Many of the assumptions that structured our understanding of the nahda—that it was predominantly derivative of European thought, that it was the purview of male readers and the domain of lofty ideas (far removed from domiciles and economics) are here overturned. The nahda, it seems, was just as likely to be found in the minor keys of the quotidian and the murmuring of everyday life. It was the domain of women as much as of men, as much economic as intellectual. In underscoring the significance of the quotidian and of embodied practices to the nahda, while emphasizing older modes of thought alongside newer social imaginaries,

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[34]Booth, "Liberal Thought and the 'Problem' of Women," 209.

[35]Ibid., 202, 190.

[36]Sherene Seikaly, "Men of Capital: Making Money, Making Nation in Palestine," in Hanssen and Weiss, Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age, 266–97.

[37]Ibid., 275, 279.

[38]Ibid., 281–6.

[39]Ibid., 277–8, 283.

Booth and Seikaly highlight how "would-be reformers, as well as those who oppose them, imagine and inhabit multiple temporalities."[40]

Contextualism and Problem-Spaces

Significantly, the aforementioned authors highlight the distinctive problem-spaces that Arab thinkers of different generations inhabit. For anthropologist David Scott, a problem-space

> is meant first of all to demarcate a discursive context, a context of language. But it is more than a cognitively intelligible arrangement of concepts, ideas, images, meanings, and so on—though it is certainly this. It is a context of argument and, therefore, one of *intervention*. A problem-space, in other words, is an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological–political stakes) hangs.[41]

As Max Weiss and Jens Hanssen note, the implications of a problem-space for the contemporary historian are numerous. It is a reminder that the goal of postcolonial history is not merely to retrieve the meaning of ideas but also to recognize the distance between our postcolonial present and the future as it was imagined by past anticolonial intellectuals—what David Scott (repurposing Reinhart Koselleck) refers to as the futures past of different generations premised upon distinct spaces of experience and horizons of expectation.[42] Further, the notion of a problem-space departs from a New Historicism in which "the historian, having discharged her or his duty of reconstructing the past, bows and exits just at the point at which the question arises of determining and judging the stakes in the present of the rehistoricizing intervention."[43]

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[40]Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, 2003), 222.

[41]David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC, 2004), 4, original emphasis; also cited in Bardawil, "Sidelining Ideology," 165–6 n. 9. In an earlier iteration, Scott refers to problem-spaces as "conceptual–ideological ensembles, discursive formations, or language games that are generative of objects, and therefore of questions. And these problem-spaces are necessarily historical inasmuch as they alter as their (epistemological–ideological) conditions of existence change." David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton, 1999), 8.

[42]Scott states, "I am not going to follow Koselleck's purposes exactly, however (his concern with the contrast between modern and nonmodern temporalities). Rather, pursuing my own ends regarding the history of the present, I am going to suggest that this relation between 'experience' and 'expectation' is of especial importance for an interrogation of the postcolonial present because anti-colonial histories of the colonial past … tend to organize a distinctive connection between the pasts they are seeking to overcome, the presents they inhabit, and the futures they are anticipating. And it is part of my argument that unless we make this relation visible to critical inquiry we will not be able to adequately discern the extent to which this expectation (or longing) is continuing to exercise a shaping effect on the analysis of our own present, nor, consequently, will we be able to judge whether or in what measure this is warranted or not." Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 31–2; Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA, 1985), 267–88; Max Weiss and Jens Hanssen, "Introduction: Arabic Intellectual History between the Postwar and the Postcolonial," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*, 1–35, at 18.

[43]Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 54; also cited in Weiss and Hanssen, "Introduction: Arabic Intellectual History between the Postwar and the Postcolonial," 19.

The question of problem-space thus looms large among historians, especially as they grapple with what it means to write Arab intellectual history today "*with the Arab revolutions*," as Leyla Dakhli pressingly frames it.[44] Unabashedly presentist in orientation while simultaneously avoiding what E. P. Thompson terms the "condescension of posterity" and Foucault the "tyranny of globalizing discourses," she notes that "[r]aising consciousness of the intellectual's place in the Arab world … poses the question of the social utility of the historian who tells the tales of forgotten lives, stories of struggle and exile, generational solidarities, emancipations, and imprisonments."[45] If, indeed, one of the goals of intellectual history is a history of the present and what Dakhli terms a "self-reflexive, action-oriented scholarship," then Weiss and Hanssen "draw attention to the strengths as well as limitations of contextualist intellectual history, not by beating a retreat into a traditional history of ideas but by way of an engagement with how the consolidating forces of global history and modern Arabic literature intersect with political dynamics in the Middle East."[46]

Scholars have echoed Dakhli's call to "index intellectuals as social actors and not mere knowledge transmitters."[47] Jens Hanssen takes the political and intellectual life of Albert Hourani (b. 1915) as a lens through which to understand Arab historicism before 1948 as "oblivious to the symbiotic relationship between liberalism and empire."[48] Methodologically, Hanssen focuses on "friendships, enmities and chance encounters," while introducing us to the panoply of figures (such as Philip Hitti, R. G. Collingwood, Charles Malik, Constantine Zurayk, Arnold Toynbee, and Judah Magnes) that constituted Hourani's sociopolitical and intellectual world, thereby reminding us of the significance of personal encounters to intellectual and political formations. Outlining Hourani's participation in the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Palestine (AAC) in 1946, Hanssen traces a diversity of influences on Hourani's intellectual formation: the significance of R. G. Collingwood's historical style of methodological inquiry, the influence of Arab nationalism, and the role of Christian philosophy in conceptualizing the place of Arab minorities—in sum, the problem-space of the 1930s and 1940s Anglo-American world as it intersected with questions of sovereignty in post-Ottoman Palestine. "The loss of Palestine," Hanssen concludes, "marked less the end of Arab liberal thought than that of Arab trust in liberal imperialism and the passing of the Arab political intermediary like … Hourani."[49]

Similarly, Abdel Razzaq Takriti concentrates on a single individual, exploring the figure of Ahmad al-Khatib (b. 1928), while concentrating on intra-regional

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[44]Leyla Dakhli, "The Autumn of the Nahda in Light of the Arab Spring: Some Figures in the Carpet," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age*, 351–71, at 357, original emphasis.

[45]Ibid., 355–6, 369.

[46]Ibid., 370; Weiss and Hanssen, "Introduction: Arabic Intellectual History between the Postwar and the Postcolonial," 34–5.

[47]Dakhli, "The Autumn of the Nahda," 355.

[48]Jens Hanssen, "Albert's World: Historicism, Liberal Imperialism and the Struggle for Palestine, 1936–1948," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age*, 62–92, at 63.

[49]Ibid., 92.

border crossings and unexpected liaisons across Kuwait City, Oman, and Palestine.[50] Takriti's focus on the Gulf is virtually unprecedented in anglophone discussions of Arab intellectual history, and his methodological emphasis is on the social location of intellectual activity, conceiving of the intellectual as a political practitioner.[51] Exploring institutions, transnational mechanisms of dissemination, and intellectually embodied practices, Takriti discusses the imbricated influences of Islamic reformism and Arab nationalism, the shift from liberalism and anti-Marxism towards Marxism post-1967, and the importance of human connections. His emphasis on "the importance of political action determining thought" and the discussion of the eclectic nature of Khatib's work is instructive of how, in many instances, "political practice … generated doctrinal versatility."[52]

Moving on to a different scale, Orit Bashkin and Max Weiss contemplate religious difference in the Arab world. Bashkin does so by underlining the centrality of Arab Jewish cultural production to the intellectual history of the region, as an essential yet often underappreciated phenomenon. The production of Arab Jewish radicalism, she argues, uncovers a lost or forgotten archive, that of communism and Jewish men of letters, of Iraqi Jews writing in Arabic and of the malleability of linguistic registers. Here Iraqi communists, Iraq and Israel, Arab Jews and Palestinians, are juxtaposed in order to celebrate an avowedly secular, Marxist heritage that eschewed Zionist narratives of the "negation of exile."[53]

Max Weiss explores the problem-space of the secular and the sectarian in modern Syria through the resurgence of religion as an object of scientific study.[54] He demonstrates the range of intellectual responses to sectarianism. These include a variety of non-secular responses in the 1940s: Mustafa al-Siba'i's (b. 1916) notion that the antidote to sectarianism did not reside in secularism—rather the solution was "more religion, stronger religion, truer religion"—and Yusuf Shukrullah Shalhat's (b. 1902) rebuttal of the notion that "religions are headed towards obsolescence and that atheism will be the religion of the future."[55] They include, as well, secular responses to the problem of sectarianism such as Yasin Hasan's (b. 1942) Marxist discussion of religion in the 1970s "as the ideological representative of a new social formation" and call for the eventual "withering of both religious difference and sectarian conflict" under the pressure of technocratic modernity, political development, and the separation of religion and state.[56] In 1990 Burhan Ghalioun (b. 1945) distinguished "sectarianism from religious belief" while highlighting "the significance of the state in the construction of modern sectarianisms," arguing that

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[50]Abdel Razzaq Takriti, "Political Praxis in the Gulf: Ahmad al-Khatib and the Movement of Arab Nationalists, 1948–1969," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*, 86–112.

[51]Ibid., 86.

[52]Ibid., 111.

[53]Orit Bashkin, "Arabic Thought in the Radical Age: Emile Habibi, the Israeli Communist Party, and the Production of Arab Jewish Radicalism, 1946–1961," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*, 62–85, at 70.

[54]Max Weiss, "Mosaic, Melting Pot, Pressure Cooker: The Religious, the Secular, and the Sectarian in Modern Syrian Social Thought," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*, 181–202.

[55]Ibid., 191–2.

[56]Ibid., 195–6.

sectarianism as a system, "like secularism as a system, is a product of European history" and of atheistic materialism.[57] For Ghalioun, the solution lay not with secularism but with the renegotiation of the social contract between the state and its individual citizens. Methodologically, Weiss sheds light on the need to move beyond the "dialectical dilemmas of diffusionism in the history of ideas" by providing a genealogy of the social sciences well beyond the frame of Europe.[58]

Other scholars address the question of problem-space through sustained analyses of generational shifts in postwar thought. Focusing on the era of decolonization and Third Worldism, Yoav Di-Capua outlines a tumultuous and heretofore ignored moment within Arab intellectual history, namely the fall of the *udaba᾿* (literati).[59] Detailing debates about *engagement*, or *iltizam*, Di-Capua adroitly demonstrates the changing of the literary guard in the postwar Middle East as well as the political stakes involved in debates about culture and literary production. Tracing a new generation of postcolonial cultural production that spanned 1939–67, one that challenged the intellectual authority of the reigning literati, as well as their cultural center in Cairo, he traces a reorganization of the cultural field in which the center of gravity shifts towards Beirut. Central to the younger generation's concerns were the questions, "What do we write, why do we write, and to whom do we write?"[60] This new generation, fatigued with what they perceived as the apolitical literary criticism of the previous generation, actively blurred the line between politics and culture as committed intellectuals who "creatively reinvented, reformulated, and domesticated existentialism and Socialist Realism."[61] Fueled by a more radical postcolonial politics, a critique of ivory-tower intellectuals, a Marxist–Leninist ideologization of culture, and the fervor of decolonization and Third Worldism, critics such as Mahdi ʿAmil (b. 1936) noted "a critic without a (political) position (*mawqiʿ*) is a critic without methodology."[62] To paraphrase Bardawil, this was a historical moment and problem-space in which ideology was placed front and center rather than sidelined.

Robyn Creswell takes us to Beirut once again, but instead uncovers a minor tradition in the 1950s and 1960s in which the "modernists' notion of cultural politics went against the grain of intellectual life in Beirut and elsewhere in the Arab world: rather than advancing a politicized concept of cultural practice, they sought to establish a firewall between literature and politics; in place of *iltizam*, they made a hero out of the unaffiliated individual."[63] Arguing for poetry as part and parcel of intellectual history, Creswell places a methodological emphasis on translation, not just from European and American poetry, but also from the classical past. The modernist or *shiʿr* poets' "transmission of classical texts aimed at the creation of a counter-canon, a modernist tradition that was also the interruption of tradition

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[57]Ibid., 197–9.

[58]Ibid., 201.

[59]Yoav Di-Capua, "Changing the Arab Intellectual Guard: On the Fall of the *Udabaʾ*, 1940–1960," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*, 41–61.

[60]Ibid., 59.

[61]Ibid., 60.

[62]Ibid., 55.

[63]Robyn Creswell, "Modernism in Translation: Poetry and Intellectual History in Beirut," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*, 113–37, at 120.

as understood by the state or any other political collective" and led to accusations by their rivals of the destruction of Arabic heritage.[64] Thus even as they posited the Arab poet as "a figure of incessant volcanic activity," the "modernist rhetoric of innovation is most productively read as a reaction formation: the movement's real historical importance lay in its work of translation and transmission."[65] Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab explores a subsequent historical moment in the early 1990s in which the journal *Qadaya wa-shahadat* (Issues and Testimonies) sought to revitalize an earlier Arabic tradition of enlightenment (*tanwir*) through multiple genres of writing: documents, selections, testimonies, and translations—all in an attempt to sustain hope in the post-independence era while acknowledging the significance of politics and promoting critical thinking anchored in lived realities.[66]

Contextualism, namely "the view that a specific context can fully account for all the potentialities of an idea," dominates many of the studies discussed above.[67] Thus we encounter Arab Jewish radical intellectuals within larger debates on Zionism and Marxism within the Iraqi context; intellectuals in the Gulf region are situated within the context of Arab nationalism; *iltizam* (*engagement*) and modernism are embedded within the moment of decolonization in Cairo, Beirut, and Baghdad; and the revival of Enlightenment thought is situated amidst the disillusionment with postcolonial Arab politics, notably with the peace process in Palestine–Israel. In many instances, ideas emerge as epiphenomenal to geohistorical forces such as imperialism, to regional political developments such as the foundation of the state of Israel, and to social formations such as the emergence of a middle-class intelligentsia.

To be sure, none of the authors fall into the trap of emphasizing a nationally bounded location as a singularly determinative context. Rather, they emphasize the intraregional and transregional movement of ideas, whether of Jewish radicalism, Arab nationalism, existentialism, or modernism. As such they understand place in far more capacious and comparative ways than did earlier generations of historians of the Arab world. Yet, as we have seen, the figures of twentieth-century Arab intellectual history remain by and large rooted in their political contexts, historically determined by the forces of colonialism, nationalism, or Third Worldism, in ways at times not applicable to other regional contexts. Or rather, their applicability to other contexts lay in highlighting the distance traversed between the problem-space of the postwar period (decolonization as a horizon of expectation) and that of the critical historian writing in the aftermath of the demise of militant and emancipatory political projects.

Historicism and Method

Let us return now to David Scott, for whom the New Historicist conceptualization "is to be applied to the inquiry into the historical past with a view perhaps to

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[64]Ibid., 130.

[65]Ibid., 136–7.

[66]Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, "Summoning the Spirit of Enlightenment: On the Nahda Revival in Qadaya wa-shahadat," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*, 311–35.

[67]Peter E. Gordon, "Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas," in Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (Oxford, 2014), 32–55, at 33.

historicizing the present, to disclosing its contingency and its constructedness."[68] He directs the investigation "into testing ongoing practices of criticism to determine whether to continue with them or else to abandon them."[69] In a sense, Scott resuscitates—in a very different context and to quite different ends—the long-standing concern articulated by Karl Löwith for whom the modern philosophy of history and the historical consciousness of the Judeo-Christian Occident was, "indeed, determined by an eschatological motivation, from Isaiah to Marx, from Augustine to Hegel, and from Joachim to Schelling."[70] Within this view of history, Löwith noted, "the past is a promise to the future; consequently, the interpretation of the past becomes a prophecy in reverse, demonstrating the past as a meaningful 'preparation' for the future."[71] However, David Scott's conception of history should not be viewed as a simplistic presentism that seeks to recuperate the past solely for the purposes of the present, even as it demonstrates "that recovering repressed pasts may loosen the present's grip on us and may activate different possibilities for the future."[72] Instead, Scott's view departs from "traditional views of context [that] root texts excessively in a past moment in a way that disables meaningful engagement. In Peter Gordon's words, this contextualism prevents us from 'imagining the possibility of semantic continuities across broad stretches of time' and at the limit it denies the possibility of our critical appropriation of those ideas 'in the present.'"[73]

The question of temporality is thus crucial. Stated differently, is the history of Arabic thought irreducibly time-bound? That is to say, are Arab intellectual traditions conceived of as "systems of time-stamped ideas that go out of fashion as new ones replace them"—tradition-based inquiry, for example, giving way to Marxism, *iltizam*, and modernism, only to perhaps later return in the guise of the repressed?[74] To address this question adequately, however, will require a discussion of questions of historicism and method, not only as currently understood within the field of Arab intellectual history, but also as potentially transformed by it.

Historicism is a notoriously slippery concept but Ian Hacking has defined it, quite simply for our purposes, as "the theory that social and cultural phenomena are historically determined, and that each period in history has its own values

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[68]Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 55.

[69]Ibid.

[70]Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago, 1949), 18.

[71]Ibid., 6. David Scott endorses the realistic historicism of Hegel, Balzac, and Tocqueville, for whom "the task of the historian was less to remind men of their obligation to the past than to force upon them an awareness of how the past could be used to effect an ethically responsible transition from present to future … Thus, for all three, history was less an end in itself than a preparation for a more perfect understanding and acceptance of the individual's responsibility in the fashioning of the common humanity of the future." Hayden White, as cited by Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 49–50.

[72]Fadi Bardawil, "*The Arabic Freud*: Discourse Interruptus," *Immanent Frame*, Oct. 11, 2018, at https://tif.ssrc.org/2018/10/11/the-arabic-freud-discourse-interruptus.

[73]Edward Baring, "Ideas on the Move: Context in Transnational Intellectual History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 77/4 (2016), 567–87, at 585.

[74]Quotation is from Joan Copjec, "Cloud, Precinct of the Theological–Historical," *Psychoanalysis and History* 20/3 (2018), 277–91, at 279.

that are not directly applicable to other epochs."[75] In turn, Weiss and Hanssen cite Quentin Skinner's neo-historicism as a "performative contextualism, in order to shift the emphasis of the discussion of the idea of the text as an autonomous object, and on to the idea of the text as an object linked to its creator, and thus on to the discussion of what its creator might have been doing in creating it."[76] At the same time, they depart from this New Historicism, as I noted above, by refusing to absolve the historian of "determining and judging the stakes in the present of the rehistoricizing intervention."[77]

Nevertheless, several questions remain in light of the historicizing impulse of much of Arab intellectual history. First, are ideas byproducts of their political contexts and the political commitments of their authors? As Aboul-Ela asks, is it the case that Arab thinkers "may even be said to be incarcerated in their bodies, their regions, and their times?"[78] One way to think about this question is to contemplate the major markers of Arab intellectual history and its litany of dates, all too often pegged to wars and to the centrality of Palestine as a (post)colonial wound.[79] Hence, for example, 1967 (the defeat of the Egyptian and Syrian armies by Israel and the ceding of Gaza and the West Bank, known as the *naksa*) casts a large shadow. As Weiss and Hanssen put it, the "1967 Arab–Israeli War has long been considered the defining watershed in postwar Arab politics and intellectual history. Indeed, 1967 has loomed so large that historians have explored very little of the life of the Arab world between 1945 and 1967."[80]

But is the narrative arc of Arab intellectual history more contingent than this narrative might presuppose? Even if war making were world making, must intellectual history follow the vicissitudes of wars and political upheavals? Stated differently, is 1967 still a bookend of this story? And, if so, are we doomed to write histories that we already know in advance? Part of the reason for the long shadow of 1967 and its attendant "melancholic historicism"—a melancholic yearning to recuperate the anticolonial moment and a utopian desire for emancipation—has been the narratives inherited both from previous generations of historians and from our historical interlocutors.[81] Among these has been what Samah Selim terms the *nahda/naksa* (awakening/catastrophe) narrative, which conceptualized Arab history in terms of a long nineteenth-century cultural renaissance partly inspired by contact with Europeans (*nahda*), and a tragic post-1967 decline brought

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[75]Ian Hacking, "Two Kinds of 'New Historicism' for Philosophers," *New Literary History* 21/2 (1990), 343–64, at 344.

[76]Skinner, cited in Weiss and Hanssen, "Introduction: Arabic Intellectual History between the Postwar and the Postcolonial," 17.

[77]Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 54; cited by Weiss and Hanssen, "Introduction: Arabic Intellectual History between the Postwar and the Postcolonial,"19.

[78]Aboul-Ela, "The Specificities of Arab Thought," 161.

[79]Weiss and Hanssen, "Introduction: Arabic Intellectual History between the Postwar and the Postcolonial," 7.

[80]Ibid., 10.

[81]I borrow the term "melancholic historicism" from Anjali Arondekar, "In the Absence of Reliable Ghosts: Sexuality, Historiography, South Asia," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 25/3 (2015), 98–122.

on by the Arab defeat in the June 1967 war with Israel (*naksa*).[82] To be sure, there is a distinction to be drawn between academic historians, on the one hand, and militant Arab intellectuals writing in the post-1967 period who oftentimes deployed a language of political despair, on the other.[83] This distinction is sometimes complicated by the fact that these categories may overlap, as is the case with Abdallah Laroui—himself both an academic historian and an engaged intellectual—for whom historicism was an antidote to Arab "backwardness."[84]

Fadi Bardawil has called into question the tethering of Arab intellectual history to declensionist narratives in the post-1967 period as, in part, a by-product of distinct problem-spaces: secular modernist and postcolonial academic discourses (Arab regional and metropolitan, respectively) that remain trapped within a backwardness (defeat)/progress binary. "The former" group, he notes, "laments the backwardness of Arab social structures and its production of a successive string of defeats, the latter laments the attachment of the former to ideologies of progress and civilization and their critique of backwardness."[85] Rather than "skip the revolutionary high tides that directly followed the defeat," Bardawil instead uncovers a minoritarian tradition that both pre-dated and followed the June defeat and is embedded in militant projects of emancipation.[86]

Might, then, we acknowledge the geohistorical and discursive weight of the political so aptly explored by Gayatri Spivak as the question of "postcolonial reason" while simultaneously emphasizing the heterogeneity and irreducibility of historical context?[87] As David Scott reminds us, to dehistoricize history is to "refuse history its subjectivity, its constancy, its eternity; to think it otherwise than as the past's hold over the present, to interrupt its seemingly irrepressible succession, causality, its sovereign claim to determinacy."[88] In so doing, we might move towards conceptualizing ideas as more than simply or overwhelmingly a product of their times, thereby relieving Arab intellectual history from the freighted burden of over-contextualism. In thinking about ideas as more than the product of context, Edward Baring has suggested "enthusiastic reading" as a mode in which there is "a willingness to treat ideas as independent of the thinkers who expressed

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[82]On the *nahda/naksa* narrative see Samah Selim, "Literature and Revolution," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43/3 (2011), 385–6. I discuss the implications of this declensionist narrative arc in "'History without Documents': The Vexed Archives of Decolonization in the Middle East," *American Historical Review* 120/3 (2015), 920–34.

[83]I thank Fadi Bardawil for encouraging me to clarify this point.

[84]Abdallah Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual: Traditionalism or Historicism?*, trans. Diarmid Cammell (Berkeley, 1976); see also Aboul-Ela, "The Specificities of Arab Thought," 154–62; Yasmeen Daifallah, "Marxism and Historicism in Abdallah Laroui's Thought," in Burke Hendrix and Deborah Baumgold, eds., *Colonial Exchanges: Political Theory and the Agency of the Colonized* (Manchester, 2017), 217–51; Samer Frangie, "Historicism, Socialism and Liberalism after the Defeat: On the Political Thought of Yasin al-Hafiz," *Modern Intellectual History* 12/2 (2015), 325–52.

[85]Fadi Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation* (Durham, NC, 2020), 108.

[86]Ibid., 109.

[87]Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

[88]Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 105.

them."[89] This is particularly the case, one might argue, when the ideas in question are philosophical and implicate longer philosophical and theological traditions. In such instances, one might emphasize the longitudinal, rather than punctual, and the internal, rather than external, logic emanating from the history of ideas, bolstered by "the belief that the details and nuances of theory matter, that philosophical positions have far-reaching consequences, even if those who held them were not aware."[90]

Archival Models and Discursive Traditions

In place of the punctual model—in which ideas are determined by a place model of context "that privileges the punctual moment of a text's production," Edward Baring proposes an archival model that "does not root a text in such a definitive way."[91] Rather, an archival model "helps us understand how actors negotiated intellectual and geographic differences in the past," while thinking about how texts "can cross temporal divides, especially that between the author and the historian," thereby opening up "context to greater historical depth than is allowed by the place model."[92] As Baring notes, "Context can refer to many things—networks of influence, practices, institutional structures, political developments, diffuse social forces, etc.—that function in different ways."[93] However, for many intellectual historians it refers, as well, to "the set of assumptions, conventions, and knowledge that a reader brings to bear in the process of understanding a text."[94] Exploring context through the example of neo-scholasticism, Baring demonstrates the spatio-temporal breadth of the archive model in which context "does not always anchor ideas to a specific time and place; sometimes it allows them to move."[95]

There is an analogue to the archival model, although with some crucial differences, within the field of Middle East and Islamic studies and that is the notion of a discursive tradition. In a watershed 1986 paper, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," Talal Asad (b. 1932) poses the central question of how to conceptualize Islam as an object of study. He argues that Islam is best understood as a discursive tradition that "relates itself to the founding texts of the Qurʾan and the Hadith"; such a discourse "addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present."[96]

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[89]Edward Baring, "Enthusiastic Reading: Rethinking Contextualization in Intellectual History," *Modern Intellectual History* 14/1 (2017), 257–68, at 258. Baring is drawing here upon Peden's methodology and his call to approach texts and ideas "sympathetically rather than skeptically or, to put it even more emphatically, enthusiastically rather than suspiciously." Knox Peden, *Spinoza contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavaillès to Deleuze* (Stanford, 2014), 14.

[90]Baring, "Enthusiastic Reading," 268; Baring, "Ideas on the Move."

[91]Baring, "Ideas on the Move," 586.

[92]Ibid.

[93]Ibid., 569.

[94]Ibid.

[95]Ibid., 587.

[96]Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam" (1986), University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown, Washington, DC, Occasional Paper Series, 14.

Asad's conceptualization of an Islamic discursive tradition is based upon the work of moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (b. 1929) and must be distinguished from any concept of an "invented tradition." MacIntyre conceives of a living tradition as

> an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition … [T]he history of a practice in our time is generally and characteristically embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the larger and longer history of the tradition through which the practice in the present form is conveyed to us … Living traditions, just because they continue a not-yet-completed narrative, confront a future whose determinate and determinable character, so far as it possesses any, derives from the past.[97]

MacIntyre's notion of a tradition is inextricably linked to a conception of virtues and practices that presuppose the individual's situatedness within a particular (moral, ethical, historical) community. It is this form of membership, constituted through a historical and social identity, which constitutes your present identity as a bearer of a tradition.[98]

Tradition-based inquiry, therefore, "treats the past neither as mere prologue nor as something to be struggled against, but as that from which we have to learn if we are to identify and move towards our *telos* more adequately."[99] So how might rehabilitating the notion of tradition help us conceptualize the depth and diversity of modern Arab intellectual history, or intellectual history more generally? For one thing, it troubles the way we think about temporal unfolding by allowing us to contemplate the convivial presence of the past in the historical moments that we are analyzing, as well as its co-presence in the present and in the future.

The question, therefore, of "the multiple temporalities of those who aspire to a shared inheritance—as well as of those who reject it"—is crucial to the idea of a discursive tradition.[100] As Asad notes, "tradition links the dead to the living … To invoke the authority of the past is a matter of interpretation, of translating the past into the present, which inevitably involves the unique potentialities and demands of the present."[101] Again, this is distinct from the somewhat antiquated

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[97]Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edn (Notre Dame, 1984), 181–225, at 222–3.

[98]Within tradition-based enquiry, "every claim has to be understood in its context as the work of someone who has made him or herself accountable by his or her utterance in some community whose history has produced a highly determinate shared set of capacities for understanding, evaluating, and responding to that utterance. Knowing not just what was said, but by whom and to whom in the course of what history of developing argument, institutionalized within what community, is a precondition of adequate response from within this kind of tradition, something itself characteristically presupposed rather than stated." Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, 1990), 203.

[99]Ibid., 79.

[100]Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York, 2018), 92.

[101]Ibid.

framework of invented traditions, in which the present provides the singular prism through which the past is selectively resuscitated, appropriated, or resituated.

Perhaps a brief example from my own work in progress may prove illuminating. In 1964, the Egyptian philosopher Uthman Muhammad Amin (b. 1905) published a philosophical treatise on *al-Juwwaniyya* (Inwardness), describing it as a foundational principle, a sensibility, and an open and unbounded philosophy within Islam.[102] Amin addressed Islam as an intermediating religion, one that imparts a perpetual spiritual value, mediating between the values of East and West.[103] There are a number of ways in which Amin's text—which is in sustained engagement with the founding texts of the Qurʾan and Hadith and which contains a dense palimpsestic set of references to medieval and modern Arab, Islamic, and European philosophy and literature, including figures as diverse as Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (b. 1058), René Descartes (b. 1596), Muhammad ʿAbduh (b. 1849), Henri Bergson (b. 1859), Rainer Maria Rilke (b. 1875), ʿAbbas Mahmud al-ʿAqqad (b. 1889), and Martin Heidegger (b. 1889), to name but a few—can be interpreted and parsed. His emphasis on the inner and esoteric dimension of consciousness has been viewed by Amin's own student, Hasan Hanafi (b. 1935), as an excessively individualistic philosophy, reflecting both a personal religious outlook and the values of the liberal era (mind, freedom, democracy) of which it was purportedly a derivative.[104] It has even been viewed as a legitimation of the "Egyptian revolution of 1952 and the 'socialist transformations' associated with it."[105]

In my own reading, rather than reduce this complex text to a polemic about postcolonial nationalism or to a simple by-product of the so-called liberal era, I engage seriously with the philosophical import of Amin's ideas. To begin with, I situate Amin within a genealogy of teachers and students that demonstrates the complexity of the history of ideas and institutions in Egypt. Amin's initiation into philosophy came by way of lectures given at the Egyptian University by the Catholic philosopher and Thomist Yusuf Karam (b. 1886), who was himself influenced by the French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain (b. 1882). Karam would provide a source of inspiration and emulation and Amin would keep in continuous contact with him throughout his career. In turn, Amin's own student, Hasan Hanafi, would later become a philosopher known for his synthesis of phenomenology and hermeneutics and its application to the study of both Islam and Christianity.

By reconstructing the intellectual networks and the genealogical linkages between teachers and students, we can uncover the significant overlaps, as well as the divergences, between intellectual and philosophical agendas across the

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[102]Uthman Amin, *al-Juwwaniyya: Usul ʿAqida wa-Falsafat Thawra* (Beirut, 1964), 113. Here Amin is drawing directly on the distinction made by Bergson between closed and static, on the one hand, and, on the other, open and dynamic religion, in Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1977).

[103]Amin, *al-Juwwaniyya*, 189.

[104]Hasan Hanafi, "Min al-Waʿy al-Fardi ila al-Waʿy al-Ijtimaʿi," in Ibrahim Madkur, ed., *Dirasat Falsafiyya Muhda ila Ruh Uthman Amin* (Cairo, 1979), 411–66, at 463–6.

[105]Ibrahim Abu Rabiʿ, "Al-Azhar and Islamic Rationalism in Modern Egypt: The Philosophical Contributions of Muṣṭafā ʿAbd āl-Raziq and ʿAbd al-Ḥalim Maḥmūd," *Islamic Studies* 27/2 (1988), 129–50, at 138.

twentieth century, and their complex relation to the past, broadly understood. An allegation frequently levied by contemporary scholars against modern thinkers who invoke the ancient or medieval past is that their engagement is "superficial."[106] And yet, on the contrary, the aforementioned genealogies demonstrate precisely the depth of engagement across generations with Neoplatonism, neo-scholasticism, Cartesianism, and the Islamic discursive tradition. As I have been arguing, the notion of a discursive tradition enables us to take the mobilization of the past by our historical actors seriously and to think outside conventional historicist and teleological frameworks that seek to place texts solely within punctual or contrapuntal contexts. Doing so, we might be better situated to dispense with strict temporal divides and periodizations tethered to statist or nationalist narratives, as important as those might be both to the historian and to their historical actors.

Note that the question of problem-space remains relevant here, as scholars must engage the question to which a text poses an answer, itself bound by historical conditions of existence. Yet the question itself cannot be understood without an understanding of the *longue durée* of argumentation within which a text, or utterance, is situated. In fact, in his initial conception of problem-spaces, David Scott relies upon MacIntyre's conceptualization of tradition, arguing that "criticism must understand itself self-consciously as a practice of entering an historically constituted field of ongoing moral argument."[107] As such, "criticism that explicitly locates itself within the terrain and thus the vocabulary of a tradition is criticism that enters into the moral space of such an argument simultaneously to contest/confirm it and reshape/retain it."[108]

One might demur that this model is best suited to the study of religious traditions insofar as they relate to the exercise of the virtues through embodied practices within a particular community. However, insofar as intellectual traditions—Marxism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and existentialism immediately come to mind—often retain a relation to ethical and embodied practices, the model is heuristically valuable. "A tradition," Asad explains, "is a set of aspirations, sensibilities, felt obligations, and relationships of subjects who live and move in the multiple times of a common world—whence the possibilities for disagreement."[109] As such, a model of discursive traditions has been and might continue to be productively used to study the multiplicity of traditions within Arab thought, including, of course, religious traditions, such as Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, as well as the dialogues between them, in addition to the study of *nahdawi*, Marxist, and psychoanalytic thought within the region.[110] It is useful to recall that traditions are

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[106]As Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," 15, notes, such views see traditions as somehow spurious, as "fictions of the present, reactions to the forces of modernity—that in contemporary conditions of crisis, tradition in the Muslim world is a weapon, a ruse, a defense against a threatening world, that it is an old cloak for new aspirations and borrowed styles of behavior."

[107]Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 7. I am grateful to Rajbir Singh Judge for bringing this point to my attention.

[108]Ibid., 10.

[109]Asad, *Secular Translations*, 93.

[110]See, for example, Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity* (Stanford, 2009); Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment*; Omnia El Shakry, *The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt* (Princeton, 2017).

authorized, in part, through the communities, scholarly or otherwise, they interpolate. An "examination of their discursive assumptions *and* the conditions under which they were produced, transmitted, and became authoritative" is thus warranted.[111]

One might further object this framework emphasizes the coherence and continuity of discursive traditions at the expense of disagreements and discontinuities. But nothing could be further from the truth. Disagreements over what constitutes the essence of a tradition are foundational to its formulation and reformulation over time. As MacIntyre notes, "Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict."[112] Or as Asad frames it, the "'essence' [of a tradition] is not neutrally determinable because it is subject to argument. A living tradition is not merely capable of containing conflict and disagreement; the search for what is essential provokes argument."[113] In addition, a framework of discursive traditions enables us to explore the incommensurability and antagonism of rival traditions (such as liberalism and Marxism), the presence of minor traditions (such as Sufism), and the historical ruptures that provoke epistemological crises.[114]

Thus Dina Rizk Khoury addresses divisions and ruptures within the Islamic discursive tradition by looking at polemics within the Ottoman city of Baghdad.[115] She deftly situates polemical debates on the nature of a virtuous political community—including debates on who was a true Muslim and what kind of knowledge this entailed, as well as the importance of consensus within the community—within a moment of crisis and rupture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In particular, she draws our attention to the impact of the Wahhabi rebellion on Baghdadi culture as it introduced a vocabulary of inclusion and exclusion within the Muslim community, while simultaneously questioning the elite role of the ʿulama in society.[116] She draws us into local debates between and amongst Wahhabis and the Sufi Naqshabandi order surrounding questions such as, what is the role of individual interpretation (*ijtihad*, individual reasoning) in relation to collective consensus (*ijmaʿ*)? Can a Muslim be expelled from the community (*takfir*) or should this practice be limited? Are ecstatic Sufi practices allowable? Are the ʿulama the sole source of religious knowledge and authority within the

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[111]Fadi Bardawil, "The Solitary Analyst of Doxas: An Interview with Talal Asad," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 36/1 (2016), 152–73, at 153, original emphasis.

[112]MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

[113]Asad, *Secular Translations*, 95. This does not, of course, imply incoherence: "Although Islamic traditions are not homogeneous, they do aspire to coherence, in a way that all discursive traditions do." Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," 16–17.

[114]On incommensurability and epistemological ruptures see MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 4–6, 105–26; on "minor" literatures and languages see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis, 1986); Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1987).

[115]Dina Rizk Khoury "Debating Political Community in the Age of Reform, Rebellion and Empire, 1780–1820," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age*, 101–20.

[116]Wahhabism refers to the followers of Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab (b. 1703), who initiated a revivalist movement based on a radical monotheism, a call for a return to the Qurʾan and Sunnah, and a rejection of the popular religious practice of the cult of saints. See John Voll, "Wahhabism and Mahdism: Alternative Styles of Islamic Renewal," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 4/1–2 (1982), 110–26; Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, 30–66.

community? Are there more direct and accessible routes to Muslim knowledge whether through individual *ijtihad* or through mediation of the Sufi *shaykh*?[117] The answers to these questions articulated with "the long tradition of exegetic and theological writing in Islamic history," as well as the political exigencies that determined the "nature and role of pedagogy and preaching (*daʿwa*) in maintaining or challenging social order."[118] It is through contestation and debate that new Islamic discourses and practices emerge regarding the toleration of difference and the role of the individual Muslim within the community.[119]

   Amal Ghazal explores what she terms conservative elements more marginalized within Arab intellectual history by exploring the thought of Yusuf al-Nabhani (b. 1849), an antireform scholar whose writings were well known both within and outside his wide Sufi network.[120] Al-Nabhani vehemently critiqued not only European and Western ideas, but also those of the so-called Islamic reformers of the *fin de siècle*, Muhammad ʿAbduh and Rashid Rida. Once again, questions surrounding the relative role of *ijtihad* or independent reasoning on religious matters, as opposed to *taqlid* (imitation or unconditional acceptance of legal decisions without an examination of their basis); on the belief in saints and saints' miracles, and the validity of chains of religious authority in defense of them; and on the possibility of intercession of the Prophet Muhammad, lay at the center of debate within the Islamic discursive tradition.[121] Most fascinating is Ghazal's discussion of al-Nabhani's use of dreams—often deemed by reformers to be antimodern or irrational—as a mode of critique in which he could "continue to refute his enemies, the reformers, in his dream-stories" and "vocally defend *taqlid* and the supplication to the Prophet and the saints, and to condemn those who claimed *ijtihad* and denounced Sufi practices."[122]

   As Khoury and Ghazal make clear, "not everything Muslims say and do belongs to an Islamic discursive tradition," rather "a practice is Islamic because it is authorized by the discursive traditions of Islam, and is so taught to Muslims—whether by an *ʿalim*, a *khatib*, a Sufi *shaykh*, or an untutored parent."[123] Contestation and debate are thus central to the process of the authorization of Islamic discursive practices and doctrines.

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[117]Khoury, "Debating Political Community," 110–19.

[118]Ibid., 113, 102.

[119]Ibid., 120. Khoury contributes (ibid., 105) to broader methodological concerns within Arab intellectual history by showing how and why some polemical debates "became integrated into the politics of rebellion and contention while others remained in the realm of scholarly debates" and by pinpointing the "political moment that serves as catalyst and presents a rupture that leads to a shift in perception in ways of framing political debates and practices."

[120]Amal Ghazal, "'Illiberal' Thought in the Liberal Age: Yusuf al-Nabhani (1849–1932), Dream Stories and Sufi Polemics against the Modern Era," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age*, 214–33.

[121]Ibid., 216, 220.

[122]Ibid., 227–32, esp. 227.

[123]Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," 14, 15. I should note that neither Khoury nor Ghazal mention Asad, although I have read them here through an Asadian lens; see the discussion of Ellen McLarney and Yasmeen Daifallah in the next section for examples of authors who rely more explicitly upon an Asadian framework.

Secularism and the Ethical Turn

At the very outset of their second volume, the editors ask, "In what ways might historians find other means for interrogating the relationship between the secular and the religious in the production of intellectual discourses in the modern Middle East?"[124] Indeed, the corpus of scholarship centered around discursive traditions and the critique of the secular has provided fruitful avenues for the exploration of just such a question. It is no longer adequate to simply presume an "incommensurable divide" between the religious and the secular as self-contained categories.[125] Rather, what we find are the "mutually constitutive powers of secular and religious discourses," as Ellen McLarney cogently demonstrates in her chapter on discourses of women's emancipation during the Islamic revival in Egypt.[126]

Exploring what Charles Hirschkind has aptly termed "an Islamic counterpublic," a "parallel discursive arena" to that of the secular state in modern Egypt, McLarney examines writers who inhabit a "space of liberalism's 'reverse discourse,' a counterpublic grounded in the private sphere where religion in the family becomes the promise of refuge from a pervasive and invasive secularism."[127] McLarney focuses on the reception of the Egyptian lawyer Qasim Amin, author of the widely debated 1899 text *The Emancipation of Women*. "Through the figure of the modern woman, Amin concentrated the struggle over religious and secular—and, implicitly, Islamic and European, indigenous and imported—ideologies."[128] Outlining the afterlife of Amin through two major conferences organized at the turn of the twenty-first century, one composed primarily of secular intellectuals and the other of Islamic scholars, McLarney eschews viewing them as representing competing interpretations of women's liberation, seeing them instead "as a kind of call and response, a consensus reached between religious and secular intellectual positions on the question of women's liberation."[129]

By placing secular and religious thought within a single conceptual field, McLarney helps us understand the ways in which liberal discourses (and concepts such as freedom, equality, and rights) have been reinterpreted within the Islamic intellectual tradition.[130] Such adaptations challenge liberalism's most cherished assumption, about its superiority, its secular nature, and "its grounding in Western political and cultural forms."[131] Methodologically, she encourages us to think about the multiple afterlives of texts—the interpolations, redactions,

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[124]Weiss and Hanssen, "Introduction: Arabic Intellectual History between the Postwar and the Postcolonial," 1.

[125]Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?", *Critical Inquiry* 35/4 (2009), 836–62.

[126]Ellen McLarney, "Reviving Qasim Amin, Redeeming Women's Liberation," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*, 262–84; quotation in Max Weiss and Jens Hanssen, "Part III: From (Neo-)Liberalism to the 'Arab Spring' and Beyond," in ibid., 233–7, at 234.

[127]Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counter-publics* (New York, 2006); McLarney, "Reviving Qasim Amin," 279.

[128]McLarney, "Reviving Qasim Amin," 263.

[129]Ibid., 262, 277.

[130]Ellen McLarney, *Soft Force: Women in Egypt's Islamic Awakening* (Princeton, 2015).

[131]Ibid., 11.

interpretations, and rehabilitations of canonical texts—a multiplicity that entailed the overlapping domain of the world of letters and the letter of the law.[132]

Yasmeen Daifallah likewise "places Islamic discourses of modernity at the center of Arab thought, highlighting the ways in which Islam may be mobilized to link intellectual concerns to the struggle of the masses" by exploring a pinnacle, although not uncontroversial, exemplar of the Islamic discursive tradition, Hasan Hanafi.[133] Over the course of a considerable *oeuvre* Hanafi has developed a synthetic project arguing that "a hermeneutics grounded in phenomenology was the most effective tool for the generic study of religions."[134] Working within a larger tradition of Islamic reform, Hanafi engages *turath* (or the Islamic tradition or heritage) in an attempt to transform mass consciousness.[135] Much like MacIntyre's notion of tradition, for Hanafi *turath* is "a living presence in contemporary reality … a corpus of inherited texts that should be continuously interpreted in accordance with the needs of the present."[136]

As Daifallah details, in 1980 Hanafi launched his Heritage and Renewal Project, whose aim was "to reinterpret the Islamic disciplines in light of the present needs of Arab societies; to establish a new discipline, 'Occidentalism,' that takes Western knowledge as its object of analysis and critique and designates the Arab self as the subject who carries out that critique; and to investigate the current social, economic, and political condition of Arab societies."[137] In a crucial sense, Hanafi directly addresses the question implicitly posed by the editors at the outset of their second volume whether or not critique must be conceptualized as secular.[138] As Wendy Brown notes, "the Western academy is governed by the presumptive secularism of critique," buoyed by the "identification of critique with secularism in the tradition of Western critical theory."[139] Conceptually, Hanafi doubly critiques postcolonial Arab thought; he accuses secularists of having "failed to appreciate the potential held by revolutionizing the Islamic tradition as a means to transform Arab society … Islamists, on the other hand, conceived of authenticity as a 'return to origins,' without regard for historical change or the indelible effects of colonial modernity on Muslim societies."[140] Both groups "failed to establish a horizon of

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[132]McLarney, "Reviving Qasim Amin," 280, 284.

[133]Yasmeen Daifallah, "*Turath* as Critique: Hassan Hanafi on the Modern Arab Subject," in Hanssen and Weiss, *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age*, 285–310; quotation in Weiss and Hanssen, "Part III: From (Neo-)Liberalism to the 'Arab Spring' and Beyond," 234.

[134]Carool Kersten, as cited by Daifallah, "*Turath* as Critique," 286.

[135]Daifallah, "*Turath* as Critique," 286–7.

[136]Ibid., 294–5.

[137]Ibid., 287.

[138]Weiss and Hanssen, "Introduction: Arabic Intellectual History between the Postwar and the Postcolonial," 19.

[139]Wendy Brown, "Introduction," in Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley, 2009), 7–19, at 8, 13. The question whether critique is secular, Brown continues, "upends one of critical theory's founding planks. Yet it does so in a spirit that allows for the possibility of other formulations of critique, secularism, and their relation. These formulations might loosen critique's identity with secularism as well as surrender its reliance on a notion of secularism insulated from critique" (ibid., 13).

[140]Daifallah, "*Turath* as Critique," 291.

political possibility."[141] Instead, Hanafi proposes not a radical rupture with tradition but rather a renewal of it, by rising "to the double challenge of both historicizing and preserving *turath*" while unleashing its emancipatory and agential possibilities.[142]

Hanafi's reconstruction of *turath* "is characteristic of the intense re-engagement with the Islamic intellectual tradition that pervaded the Arab intellectual scene in the 1980s and 1990s" by those who perceived "themselves as the heirs" of the *fin de siècle* Islamic revival, as well as of the secular left.[143] This fungibility between Islamist and leftist thought demonstrates that a simple distinction between secular and religious criticism simply will not do. Critique, then, is decidedly neither the purview of secularism alone nor "the singular characteristic of the modern West."[144]

Conclusion

If I have made a strong case for the heuristic value of the concept of a discursive tradition, it is because it provides one of the most powerful, yet subtle, critiques of historicism. To be clear, this critique of historicism is levied not in order to retreat to a simplistic ahistoricism or to an allegedly outmoded history of ideas, nor is it meant to sideline questions of periodization. Rather this critique of historicism aims to recognize elements of thought that are fundamentally irreducible to historical context.

Although the Asadian discursive-tradition framework has made strong inroads into anthropology and religious studies, it has been decidedly less influential within the modern historiography of the Middle East, perhaps due to an unfounded suspicion that antihistoricist theories are inherently orientalist.[145] In fact, one might argue that within the field of Arab intellectual history it has been Edward Said's secular criticism and methodological contrapuntalism that has dominated the field. The punctual, in other words, has predominated over the longitudinal, and Said's method of contrapuntal reading, with its attendant emphasis on the geographical, has taken precedence over the notion of the multiple temporalities embodied within discursive traditions.[146] This has manifested itself in an

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[141]Ibid., 292.

[142]Ibid., 292, 299.

[143]Ibid., 308–9.

[144]Talal Asad, "Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism," in Asad et al., *Is Critique Secular?*, 20–63, at 47. This is a useful piece that gestures towards a schematic genealogical history of critique, tracing it from its Greek origin in the resolution of particular crises, to its reformulation in theological disputes, to its aspiration to universal truths in Kantian thought.

[145]For Asadian approaches in anthropology see, for example, Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, 2005); and Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*. For an exemplary approach in religious studies see Ovamir Anjum, *Politics, Law and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment* (Cambridge, 2012). In history see Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*.

[146]To their immense credit, Hanssen and Weiss do not weigh in on this debate but instead gather pieces "without claiming to arrive at a single consensus conclusion." Weiss and Hanssen, "Introduction: Arabic Intellectual History between the Postwar and the Postcolonial," 6. Here I differ from their reading, in which they argue that the "academic conversation may have shifted" away from Said's "preferred mode of secular criticism and contrapuntal reading of empire towards a broad and incisive critique of secularism inspired by the work of Talal Asad (b. 1932) and others." Ibid., 5.

overemphasis on the punctual political moorings of ideas: how they relate to colonialism, nationalism, and postcolonial predicaments.

In an important sense, the debate over historicist contextualism, as well as the relative merits and demerits of contrapuntal and longitudinal views, is a dilemma highly relevant and indeed familiar to all intellectual historians. Peter Gordon has distinguished between exhaustive and restrictive forms of contextualism; the former refers to "the epistemological and normative (and implicitly metaphysical) premise that ideas are properly understood only if they are studied within the context of their initial articulation," whereas the latter simply "calls our attention to the resonances and ramifications of ideas in different and diverse settings."[147]

As Gordon, notes, "contextualism need not imply the *exhaustion* of an idea," and historians and anthropologists have long engaged the question of the critical appropriation of past ideas in the present.[148] The notion of a problem-space, together with the concept of tradition, provides intellectual history with an approach that takes seriously both the punctual moment of textual production and the *longue durée* of discursive traditions. Within this framework, the appropriation of the past hinges on practices of critique and the ethical relation of the historian to the past, present, and future. What might it mean to write intellectual histories that acknowledge the historical conditions of existence of diverse problem-spaces while simultaneously recognizing "the possibility of that atemporal 'now' at which writer and reader encounter each other"?[149] Dwelling in such a space might be imagined as the caesura between past and present, a place where a meaningful historical knowledge might be created for our times.

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[147]Gordon, "Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas," 36, 33.

[148]Ibid., 51, original emphasis.

[149]MacIntyre refers to "the possibility of that atemporal 'now' at which writer and reader encounter each other, that 'now' at which both can appeal away from themselves and the particularity of their own claims to *what is* timelessly, logically, ontologically, and evaluatively, and is only thereby and therefore the property of neither writer nor reader." MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 45, original emphasis.