

THE GROWING PAINS OF ARAB INTELLECTUALS

As a social group intellectuals everywhere are almost always gripped by certain tensions and uncertainties. Some of these tensions are inherent in the universal role of intellectuals as creators and carriers of culture; others reflect the particular socio-economic and political milieu in which they live. Although, for instance, the American intellectual has been enjoying more power and status in society,¹ he still must “avoid the twin temptations of total withdrawal and total integration.”² As intellectuals are being increasingly absorbed and recognized by various parts of the American “establishment,” they seem haunted by the fear of selling out or losing part of their creative and critical role in society.

¹ Both David Riesman and Seymour Lipset support the contention that intellectuals in the U.S. have risen in power and status. See D. Riesman, “The Academic Career: Notes on Recruitment and Collegueship,” in *Daedalus* (Winter, 1959), pp. 152-57. S. Lipset, “American Intellectuals: Their Politics and Status,” in *Daedalus* (Summer, 1959), pp. 467-473.

² Lewis Coser, “America’s Intellectuals: The Twin Temptation,” in *New Society*, January 14, 1965, No. 120, pp. 10-13.

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Conversely, total detachment or alienation may also be self-defeating. Likewise, some observers have found the English intellectual "gentlemanly, amateurish and unrigorous, too near the upper classes and to established power to exercise real independence of mind and creativity."³ The French intellectual also appears to be plagued by the same paradox. "There is no country in the world where intellectuals have more influence, attract more attention, or enjoy more prestige than they do in France. But the relationship between French intellectuals and the society to which they belong is a paradoxical one."⁴

The dilemmas of the contemporary Arab intellectual, as elsewhere in developing societies, are of a different nature and magnitude. To begin with the so-called "searching, detached, yet concerned" intellectual is still a rare individual. Intellectuals in most parts of the Arab world have not gained enough sense of identity or self-awareness as a social group to exert any appreciable influence. Neither are they radically alienated, so that from the fringe of society they could effectively criticize or rebel against the social order. Yet, and here lies the paradox, an increasing number of technocrats and university graduates find themselves in positions of power and authority. Like the salaried middle class to which they belong, they attained power before gaining status, order and security. Therefore, they use their power not to defend their status and security but to create them.⁵

This is indeed a revolutionary task, and the educated elite are expected to be the torch-bearers of rationality and secularization in a society where non-rational and traditional forces are still predominant. The tensions which the Arab intellectual faces are not primarily those of alienation or involvement, or how close or removed he is from the loci of power and authority. Rather, they emerge from his underlying task of reconciling the traditional and rational elements in society. They are the tensions of a "marginal

³ Malcolm Bradbury, "Uncertainties of the British Intellectual," in *New Society*, December 24, 1964, No. 117, pp. 7-9.

⁴ Maurice Cranston, "Paradox of the French Intellectual," in *New Society*, January 7, 1965, No. 119, pp. 12-14.

⁵ Manfred Halpern, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa* (Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 52.

man,” a man torn between the dictates of reason and rationality and the value patterns of his traditional culture.

This essay attempts, in a rather interpretive and suggestive manner, to explore two aspects of the problem: A broad description of some of the salient features of intellectual life, and an account for the tensions arising between intellectuals and society. Only by so doing can we assess the role of intellectuals and the nature of their dilemmas in contemporary Arab society.

I. SOME SALIENT FEATURES OF INTELLECTUAL LIFE

What sort of people qualify to earn the label of intellectual in the Arab world? Since the term has come to cover a multitude of persons and activities, it is extremely difficult to arrive at one concise and single definition of the intellectual. From non-manual workers to university graduates, experts to abstract ideologists, men of action to men of reflection, philosophers, artists, journalists to bureaucrats and technocrats, all have—at different times and places—made claims to the title. To avoid such confusion, the term will be here treated broadly to include all those who create, carry and apply culture. In this sense then a university graduate, by virtue of his higher education alone, need not pass for an intellectual. Only if he partakes in the process of creating, diffusing, or applying culture, will he become one. Conversely, albeit rarely, a person with no formal university training may qualify.

The distinction between the creative agents as opposed to those who are more involved in disseminating or applying ideas is pertinent. Ideally, the heart of any intellectual community is composed of writers, men of letters, philosophers, scientists, scholars and artists who, in the words of Raymond Aron, are the people who “live by and for the exercise of the intellect.”⁶ These, in almost any society, are the passionate and dedicated few. The majority of the intellectual sector, however, is composed of scholars, writers, artists, and research workers who go on producing without creating original ideas or new forms. Below

⁶ Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (N. Y., W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1957), p. 206.

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them are the serious journalists, political and social commentators, and by and large people engaged in the mass media who serve as communicating links in disseminating ideas to others. Finally, there are the popularizers—pseudo-intellectuals with commercial interests who “cease to interpret and begin to mislead” and vulgarize the creative standards and cultural outputs in society.

If intellectuals then are defined in an exclusive manner—i.e., people who derive pleasure and perhaps profit from creating or playing with ideas, rather than applying them—then very few indeed qualify to earn such a label in the Arab world. This is why our usage here will be in a broader sense to include those who take part in diffusing and applying culture as well. The distinction, nonetheless, should be borne in mind. To the extent also that members of the liberal professions—physicians, lawyers, engineers and other practitioners—are more interested in practical achievements than culture in general, they may be excluded from our definition.⁷

It is not as difficult to identify some of the broad characteristics of intellectual life in the Arab world. It is apparent, upon any cursory observation, that intellectuals as a social group are fragmented and still lack the identity and class consciousness common in other social strata of society. Deficient in status and security, they also do not appear to enjoy any substantial measure of intellectual freedom.

Fragmentation

Throughout its cultural development, Arab civilization thrived best in urban and spiritual centers. As far back as the Pre-Islamic “Jāhiliya,” markets like *’Ukāz* were centers where producers and consumers of goods and cultural products met to exchange their wares and ideas. With the advent of Islam, the mosque became the center of gravity for the spiritual, temporal and cultural forces in the community. Later, in its medieval and classical

⁷ Both R. Aron & J. Schumpeter justify such exclusion unless of course such practitioners talk or write about subjects outside of their professional competence which no doubt they do, especially lawyers. See, Aron, *Ibid.*, p. 207; J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism & Democracy* (N. Y., Harper and Brothers, 1947), pp. 145-155.

periods, all sort of guilds, lodges and neighborhoods provided appropriate outlets for integrating the intellectual life of the community.

Although the charge that “in the historical Islamic tradition, the intellectual has been peripheral and precarious,”⁸ is debatable, one can at least assert that intellectual communities which centered around bazaars, mosques, guilds or neighborhoods were not rare or precarious. They played a conspicuously important part in integrating the intellectual life down to the 19th century. After all, mystical-ascetic orders like Sufism emerged and developed around such centers. “The greatest achievement of Sufism,” writes Sir Hamilton Gibb, “was that the orders succeeded, deliberately or not, in creating a religious organization parallel to, and identified with, the units of which Muslim society was composed. Each village community, each guild association in the towns, each regiment of troops, in India even each caste group, had its sufi ‘lodge,’ which linked its members together in a common religious allegiance, and gave to its religious ceremonies a fraternal and communal appeal.”⁹ The famed accounts of Ibn Battuta, the 14th century North African traveller, demonstrates the significance of those “lodges” in providing refuge and a sense of identity and intimacy among intellectuals.

Little of this fraternal and communal feeling survives today, either in form or in spirit. The decline was really inevitable. Urbanization and expansion of commerce and industry weakened these associations and diluted the homogeneity of brotherhoods and orders. Oddly enough, the advent of mass media and swift means of transportation appear to have had little effect in recreating this sense of community or in bringing Arab intellectuals closer together. Neither have Arab intellectuals sought to find substitutes (for better or worse) in outlets like Greenwich Village or Saint-Germain des Près which serve to satisfy part of their yearning for a communal and fraternal experience. The so-called “coffee-house” intellectual, a fashionable and symbolic figure in

⁸ Wilfred C. Smith, “The Intellectuals in the Modern Development of the Islamic World” in *Social Forces in the Middle East*, S. N. Fisher (Ed.) (N. Y., Cornell University Press, 1955), p. 196; see also, Halpern, *op. cit.*, p. 19-22.

⁹ H. A. R. Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1962), p. 216.

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intellectual circles in the West, is still virtually non-existent in the Arab world.

Political fragmentation also adds to the splintering of intellectual life. Cleavages among intellectuals existed in early Islam, but they were largely intellectual in character, such as the general cleavage in society between the consensus of the *ulema* (scholar-jurists) and that of the *ummah* (masses). Present day schisms and ideological rifts are predominantly prompted by political and sectarian undertones. Nothing akin to the lively debate between the "Liberal Secularists" and "Islamic Revivalists" which consumed the intellectual energies of social and political thinkers during the turn of this century can be discerned today. Neither can we boast of intellectual giants of the *variety* of Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashīd Ridā, Lutfī al-Sayyid, Butrus al-Bustānī—to mention a few—who were able to transcend the parochial problems of their day and view the national crisis in a broader and more profound perspective.

Out of such debates, intellectual traditions and schools of thought were created, and intellectuals were known by their allegiances and commitments to either of these traditions. Very few of the present generation of intellectuals sustain any such labels. The overriding political differences have factionalized their loyalties and allegiances. Except on formal and ritualistic occasions there is little effective dialogue and exchange of views and cultural products. The few symposia and conventions are rarely attended by representatives from all Arab countries. Egyptian delegates, for example, often fail to attend academic conferences sponsored in Lebanon, and except for the heated exchange of incriminatory and often vulgar vilifications through the radio and the press, there has been almost no association between Egyptian and Syrian intellectuals.

Not only regionally, but locally Arab intellectuals are torn asunder by divided loyalties and non-intellectual allegiances. Even within a small country like Lebanon there is little association between the scholars of its four universities. Perhaps by virtue of the names they carry and the cultural interests they represent (American, French, Lebanese, and Arab) there has been a minimum of rapport between colleagues affiliated with these different institutions. One frequently encounters a highly cultivated Amer-

ican University professor who is totally oblivious of even the names of writers in his own field in, say, the French University, let alone an acquaintance with the intellectual milieu which sustains them.

What accentuates this fragmentation and may in turn prevent a closer rapprochement between intellectuals is the noted tendency, observed by Wilfred Smith, "that today's Muslim intellectual is everywhere not merely bilingual, but linguistically bicultural."¹⁰ In other words, this is not simply a matter of feeling at home in two different languages or cultures. Rather, it stems from the fact that many foreign trained Arab intellectuals think conceptually in one language, and converse and write in another. It is not too uncommon, for instance, for a young scholar in Lebanon to undertake his research and writing in English, converse with his friend in French and address his parents in Arabic. This is certainly not an unmixed blessing. In some academic disciplines, particularly the social sciences which have not as yet developed a standardized conceptual terminology in Arabic, foreign-trained scholars find some difficulty in communicating with others in their native tongue. Even if they chose to, chances are the result might not be too intelligible, except perhaps to those who make the effort of retranslating it into Western concepts. Furthermore, in the absence of respectable journals and publishing houses, many a young scholar does not even bother to write in Arabic. After all his intellectual standing in his own community very often depends on how he is judged abroad, and foreign publications guarantee a wider and more international audience.

What this, in brief, adds up to is a further widening of the gulf between intellectuals. This linguistic fragmentation, along with the political and geographical, has certainly not been conducive to the emergence of a sense of cohesion among intellectuals. Without cohesion, they can neither have a unified audience, nor can they make their presence felt in society.

¹⁰ Wilfred C. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

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Class, Status and Power

As creators and bearers of culture, it is expected that intellectuals' commitment to the world of ideas and creative thought should ultimately supersede other loyalties and attachments. This tendency, at least in the West, did progressively suppress differences of birth, status and wealth, and tended to unite intellectuals on the basis of their common training and interests.¹¹ This is hardly the case in the Middle East. Apart from the uncertainties and ambivalences of the Arab intellectual, his loyalties are still predominantly traditional in character. He appears to derive greater satisfaction and security from his kinship and communal ties than from his participation in an intellectual career. At least his association with traditional circles is still sociologically more meaningful for him, and he remains partly if not totally attached to non-intellectual pursuits. If he does dabble with an intellectual activity, it is at best a pastime or a diversion; it is rarely pursued with gusto and total involvement. Besides, and this admittedly is expected of developing societies, knowledge and higher education in general are largely pursued as a means. As long as this utilitarian bias persists, there can be little hope of cultivating an interest in knowledge or an intellectual activity as an end in itself. "For everything which a man fails to pursue for its own sake," Schopenhauer warns us, "is but halfpursued."¹²

Partly because of the persistence of such tendencies, intellectuals in the Arab world have remained amorphous and characterless as a social group. They still lack the identity and class-consciousness apparent in other social strata of society. They also do not serve as champions of classes or social groups in conflict, or the articulators of their ideologies. Neither do they constitute, as does perhaps their counterpart in some of the Afro-Asian emerging countries, a new aristocracy or a new elite. They are not an aristocracy, because they are not as yet equipped with symbols of status and social prestige, nor are they the pace-setters in dictating standards of taste and patterns of social behavior.

¹¹ See Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1960), pp. 135-146.

¹² Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays* (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1951), p. 35.

They are not an elite, in the true sense of the word, because they do not initiate or articulate the ideals and values of their society. The emerging intelligentsia—the technocrats, experts, social engineers, bureaucrats, the military—are by and large serving such pace-setting roles in the Arab world today, but not the intellectuals.

Needless to say, the plight of intellectuals has not always been so. Intellectual life in early Islam was not only more integrated and homogeneous, but the scholar-jurists (*ūlemā*) enjoyed unmatched status and prestige in society. They were the accredited guardians and interpreters of theological doctrine as well as of the *Shari'ah*—the corpus of Islamic jurisprudence. They were scholars in the broad sense of the term and not simply specialists in theology as often assumed. They frequently lectured and wrote books on several aspects of Islamic sciences and social thought.

The fact that contemporary Arab intellectuals have not as yet achieved a sense of identity and class-consciousness may, it could be argued, be a blessing in disguise. A group whose class position is relatively fixed may be more susceptible to becoming rigid and conservative in its thinking. This likelihood does not loom on our intellectual horizon. Cultural life in the Arab world suffers more from the sterility of thought and mediocrity of brain power than from class rigidities or frustrations imposed by the social order. In fact, what is needed today is not an intellectual class, not even an intellectual elite, but the commitment and dedication of those men who are the bearers of intellectual activity. No matter how dedicated, however, these men cannot act and think in a vacuum. Without some cultural traditions and institutional supports, intellectuals cannot possibly perpetuate themselves as a unified group. Neither can they preserve or add much to the cultural heritage of society.

Lacking any sense of identity or self-awareness as a social group to exercise any real independence of mind and creativity, intellectuals are also deficient in status and prestige. Depending on the intellectual traditions and needs of particular societies, the value attached to the hierarchy of brainpower is distributed differently in every country. In Germany, for example, the laurels of prestige and status have always gone to the professor and scholar; in America to the expert; in France to the “*homme de*

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lettres" or writer; in Africa to the newly emerging political ideologist. In the Arab world, because of the pending political and economic problems, it is the bureaucratic and political intelligentsia which presently occupy the top positions of the social pyramid. "Leadership in all areas of Middle Eastern life is increasingly being seized by a class of men inspired by non-traditional knowledge, and it is being clustered around a core of salaried civilian and military politicians, organizers, administrators, and experts."¹³

Lebanon, though not in all senses, is an exception. In a service-biased economy, where the mercantile spirit still thrives and material and pecuniary values are highly coveted, it is the manipulators of men and money who seem the most privileged in society. Intellectuals—the manipulators of ideas, people who "live by and for the exercise of the intellect,"—are still relatively lower on the totem pole. That intellectuals then should harbor some hostility to businessmen is no mystery. By virtue of their functions, the two groups are impelled by entirely different motives and aspirations. What is surprising is that in Lebanon the two groups seem perfectly compatible at times. Scholars enjoy extended sojourns into the business world, and successful business firms affect scholarly interests to boost their public image in the community.

The status of any group is in part a function of its size and utility. For if scarcity breeds value, then excess must depreciate it. With increasing educational opportunities, there has been an enormous proliferation in the intellectual sector. In fact, there has been an excess of high talent manpower. It is true the recruitment of people with higher education has been increasing. So too have enterprises like public relations, market research and mass communication which tend to draw on the supply of persons with quasi-intellectual interests and training. But all in all, one might say there has been an overproduction of intellectuals, in that the society contains many who feel their training and intellectual powers are in excess of opportunities or jobs available. This creates a characteristic pattern of frustration and hostility clearly evident among the young generation of foreign

¹³ Manfred Halpern, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

trained intellectuals. Because of his precarious position, the Arab intellectual seems particularly predisposed to what Nietzsche terms “ressentiment.” Though he feels angry and hostile, he seems overwhelmed by a sense of being powerless to express those feelings actively against the social situation evoking them. His discontent remains latent, and his hostility impotent. Though there is cause for rebellion, few indeed have rebelled; even fewer have become “Angry Young Men.” He is not then an uprooted and alienated man in the manner of which Dostoevski spoke of the Russian intellectual. Neither is he a restless man refusing to be reconciled to his native culture or to cooperate with legitimate institutions in society. Instead, he appears to have resigned himself to an apathetic defeatist attitude: to continue to re-experience this sense of “impotent hostility,” and thereby earn the occasional rewards of docility.

If Arab intellectuals have not acquired the status of a privileged class endowed with political influence and social prestige, it is little wonder that they have remained powerless. There is a danger, in fact, in enjoying the status and power of privileged positions before attaining enough intellectual maturity. For if they lose political power, as is likely to happen when they attain it prematurely, they will have little else left to fall back on. It should also be remembered that this new breed of intellectuals—people with western education—is of relatively recent vintage. It made its appearance in the Arab world around the beginning of the 19th century. The other two traditional groups of intellectuals—the scholar-jurists and the sufi shaykhs, who for centuries competed to control the ideas of the masses—never enjoyed much political power. There have been, of course, a few exceptions. At certain times in the 17th century, for example, the scholar-jurists were the most important class politically in the Ottoman Empire. But then in concentrating on political power, they lowered their intellectual standards and thereby forfeited the respect of other sections of the community.¹⁴

Thus only on rare occasions has the pen been stronger than the sword in the Arab world. The rivalry between men of letters

¹⁴ W. Montgomery Watt, *Islam and the Integration of Society* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 248.

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and men of power is not of the sibling variety. Intellectuals have not been too readily admitted into the ranks of the body politic. When they are, it is normally not on the merit of their intellectual prowess. Rather, when they have been adopted or sponsored by some traditional political figure. In a way, the feelings between the two groups are mutual: Politicians have not sought intellectual leadership, nor have intellectuals expressly craved political leadership. This need not be a cause for alarm. To the contrary, it may work to the benefit of all. Intellectuals, after all, in the words of Harold Laski, may prove to be "invaluable servants but impossible masters."

When intellectuals fail to maintain power or recognition by the political regime, they often seek it indirectly through their participation in any of the instruments of political change—i.e., labor unions, political parties and pressure groups. But such voluntary associations are still ineffective as agencies of social and political change in the Arab world. Except for a few instances, they have failed to attract any radical cadre of intellectuals. In fact, this may account for their failure thus far. Furthermore, open opposition to the ruling group is still risky and difficult, especially in one-party states or autocratic regimes. Those who choose the hard and uncompromising way of open opposition often end up either jobless or in political exile. This, among other things, has made for a sizeable drainage of brainpower.

Intellectual Freedom?

What the Western intellectual lacks in terms of security, status and power, he compensates for in freedom of inquiry and thought. His counterpart in the Arab world appears deficient on both counts. What he has lost in status (compared to the scholar-jurists of early Islam) he has not gained in freedom. He still does not enjoy any substantial measure of freedom in his social role of discoverer and disseminator of knowledge. In some parts of the Arab world, because of political and other considerations, there are restrictions on the scope and nature of free inquiry. In Lebanon, for example, haunted by the fear of upsetting the proverbial sectarian balance, a social scientist is often prompted

to ignore any consideration of the religious factor which might otherwise be significantly correlated to some other variable under study. In a preliminary meeting of the editors and contributors of a prospective book on the "Politics of Lebanon," to cite one instance, it was implicitly agreed by the group—all young scholars in leading Lebanese universities—to avoid inviting controversial figures or handling issues which may touch some delicate and sensitive aspect of the society. Similarly, little of the critical thought of native Egyptian scholars—and surely some must harbor a few misgivings about the present regime—has as yet seen the light of print.

The historical roots of this phenomenon, which run deeper than its political and sectarian manifestations, may be inherent in the very nature of a personalized and authoritarian society. One of the obvious features of such a society is the lack of freedom in expressing one's feelings or in articulating one's thoughts. Since the Arab in general is extremely sensitive to public pressure and is keen on preserving appearances, one frequently encounters a striking contrast between outer social behavior and inner thinking and feeling. What one says or does may often be at variance with what he thinks or feels. In intellectual life this discrepancy manifests itself in the lack of frankness in expressing one's views or in being critical of others. To criticize dispassionately the ideas of a colleague is invariably confused with a personal affront. Rarely is the person dissociated from his ideas. Consequently, an attack on his ideas is also an act of personal vilification.

In an authoritarian society one is also haunted by the fear of defying elders or challenging the sovereignty of the sacred norms. Little of the pent-up hostility is verbalized or released. "Resentment, dislike, even hate are masked by outward compliance... The mask becomes the man, the man the mask."¹⁵ The net result of all this is the decay of spontaneity and individual freedom. Nothing could stifle more the creative impulse of a generation.

¹⁵ H. Khatchadorian, "The Mask and the Face," in *Middle East Forum*, February 1961, p. 18.

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II. TENSIONS AND DILEMMAS

Deprived of the privileges of status and power of a cohesive self-conscious elite, and enjoying little freedom for spontaneous and independent self-expression, the Arab intellectual is also pinned on the horns of some impetuous dilemmas. His growing sense of crisis, to repeat, need not only be a reflection of the socio-political milieu in which he lives. It is in part inherent in the role of intellectuals as torch-bearers of knowledge and reason in society.

Rationality vs. Traditionalism

The underlying tension which the Arab intellectual has to grapple with is the discrepancy between the dictates of reason and rationality, which ideally he is expected to live by, and the non-rational and traditional forces rooted in the culture. This tension is particularly felt by the foreign trained intellectuals who return home so thoroughly steeped in Western ideas and ways of life that they often remain misfits in their native land. These are the people who, in effect, can never go home again. When they do, they return with dreams of national and personal advancement which are so ruthlessly shattered that they are left bitter and frustrated.

This bitterness is due not only to the disparity between their youthful dreams and the woeful reality they have to face but also to the growing realization that their knowledge and training are not being adequately used. They burn with a crushing sense of failure and defeat. Failure because they seem unable to function creatively in society; defeat because they are often compelled to compromise and seek jobs below their intellectual level or interest. This bitterness and hostility, if it remains impotent, may threaten to make perennial misanthropists out of them. A mind defeated by the strains of contemporary problems can either become increasingly alienated or seek refuge in the glories of the past or in communal attachments. None of these defense mechanisms is conducive to the creative and cultural life of society.

This is the nagging dilemma which prods the mind of Arab intellectuals: How to reconcile the rational premises of the pre-

sent with the secure and tested traditions of the past? The dilemma is intensified because the people entrusted with the task of bringing about this fusion are often of two extremes: the ruthless young secularists, bent on change at all costs; and their traditionalist compatriots, who seek to preserve the familiar without upsetting the status quo. The former are out of touch with traditions; the latter refuse to entertain the new. The development offices in most Arab countries, as a result, abound with moribund projects and unimplemented blue-prints for exuberant schemes. The defunct "Liberation Province" of Egypt is one such costly victim of this twin-gift for audacious planning and executive ineffectiveness. Intended as a showpiece to display the virtues of collective farming and other socialistic formulas, the architects of the project had underrated the resiliency of some of the traditional patterns of behavior. The average Egyptian *fallah*, notwithstanding the hopes of eager political ideologists, could not be transplanted overnight into an impersonal and rational world.

The failure of this and many other such projects demonstrates, among other things, the failure of bringing about a compatible fusion between the traditional and rational elements. It is interesting to note in this connection that, unlike contemporary Asian intellectuals, those who are unable to reconcile their rational beliefs with the persisting traditional values have not flirted with communism as a possible substitute. As an ideology or technique of political action or economic development, communism does not seem to have been in particular favor among Arab intellectuals. It has, as elsewhere, attracted the malcontents of the depressed classes in society but relatively very few of the alienated intellectuals. This is further evidence that kinship, fealty and other traditional loyalties are still stronger than some of the secular and ideological commitments.

Naturally not all intellectuals are seeking alternative substitutes. Fewer may even be conscious of the implications of such a dilemma. The bulk, and here lies the paradox in our intellectual life, behave as though they want to have their cake and eat it too. While they commit themselves to a life in pursuit of reason and rationality, they harbor very few strong antipathies to traditional authority and "sacred" institutions in society.

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Intellectuals vs. Intelligentsia

In most developing societies, there has been an intimate association between higher education and government employment. The Arab world is certainly no exception. In fact, with increasing nationalization and state control, the government is increasingly becoming the major employer of all kinds and levels of university graduates. The attractions of a government job, particularly in areas where the private sector is shrinking, are self-evident. In Egypt, observes Professor Berger, it has been an irresistible combination of need, tradition, and deliberate planning which has geared the ambitions of the educated elite toward a government job. "The need has been apparent in the oversupply of educated youth in certain fields in an agricultural society. The tradition was created early in Egypt's modern era when secular education was established to train skilled civil servants. The deliberate planning cemented these effects by the creation of special job incentives to acquire formal education."¹⁶

This tendency, irresistible or otherwise, has certainly left its mark on the broad intellectual life of society. While giving an impetus to the growth of technocrats and bureaucrats, with all the associated evils which such activities carry within their wake, it stifles the growth of that variety of intellectual activity which thrives best as independent and liberal professions.

Even where non-political and independent intellectuals continue to exist as a minority, the political upheavals consume the bulk of their intellectual resources. They seem totally engrossed in the effort of accounting for political instability or in defending a particular form of government. That this is expected in a society undergoing so much political and social change is not to be denied. After all, intellectuals would be guilty of subscribing to an ostrich-like attitude if they are apathetic, or insensitive to the symptoms of political malaise which grip their society. But then they are also intellectually myopic if they perceive only this.

I am not for a moment decrying the political role and concern of Arab intellectuals. The nature of present day Arab society no

¹⁶ Morroe Berger, *Bureaucracy and Society in Modern Egypt* (Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 70.

doubt justifies such political consciousness. But this, I maintain, is being done at the expense of broader and more creative cultural activities. That an *intelligentsia* then—defined in Professor Seton-Watson's terms as people with "a modern education who live for and by political and social ideas"¹⁷—is vitally necessary in the Arab world today is not being disputed. This should not be confused, however, with communities of *intellectuals* who create, carry, and apply culture. Furthermore, since both groups are drawn from the same supply of educated elite, one can only exist at the expense of the other. It is the intelligentsia, and not the intellectual elite, which is walking away with the lion's share of society's privileged and powerful positions.

This dilemma generates several tensions. To begin with, and in no way is this peculiar to the Arab world, the intellectual feels the tensions inherent in the dual nature of his role. Should he remain a "man of reflection," a detached scholar pursuing and defending a life of reason in its purer and abstract forms; or a "man of action," eager to participate in the social and political struggles of his society? To say that there is room for both types of men does not redress the tension. The Arab world today is in desperate need of enlightened action and the pressures on, and public obligations of, the educated elite to participate in reform movements and development programs are immense. Only the insensitive few can remain oblivious to such civic callings. Even where intellectuals manage to enjoy a relative amount of detachment, they are invariably drawn into the social and political affairs of their communities when the conduct of politicians and policy makers begins to have serious cultural implications. To remain then a disinterested observer is to invite lay and inexperienced action. On the other hand, to become increasingly absorbed into the various parts of the growing government bureaucracy may ultimately spell the progressive obsolescence of the free and unattached intellectual.

It is true that one need not be too dogmatic in asserting that public or political involvement invariably corrupts intellectuals. Yet many of the younger intellectuals are afraid, and recent

¹⁷ As quoted by Colin Legum, "Africa's Intellectuals: The Thin Black Line," in *New Society*, December 31, 1964, No. 118, pp. 6-10.

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historical trends justify their fear, that in becoming state employees, they may cease to be truly creative and critical. If his European counterparts (particularly French and to a lesser degree British intellectuals) feel relatively free in the service of the state, it is because they enjoy comfortable and remunerative positions. Apart from civil service, a large number of them have contracts with the state radio, television monopoly or some other comfortable places such as museums and other national and cultural institutions. Furthermore they have André Malraux and C.P. Snow as Ministers of culture—two distinguished intellectuals with passionate dedication to the task of promoting culture. Very few Arab intellectuals are employed in appropriate cultural institutions, and fewer indeed benefit from the association with such inspiring superiors as Malraux and C.P. Snow. Imagine Taha Hussein as Minister of Culture; he would certainly succeed in recruiting the support and sympathy of intellectuals who might otherwise have some misgivings about rallying behind a mere politician. But then very few can or are willing to play such a dual role. Those who do are bound to lose some of the prestige which belongs to the unattached and independent intellectual.

In another respect, the contemporary Arab intellectual appears to be caught in an equally awesome impasse. He is torn between his loyalties to Arab nationalism and an urge to be culturally and artistically creative. As a citizen he cannot possibly avoid his involvement in the national and political crises of the day. He feels caught in the web of economic and political problems. As an intellectual, he realizes that this involvement will ultimately curtail his contributions to culture. Here lies the dilemma. Arab culture will retain its value only if the national goals and aspirations are successfully maintained; and if intellectuals wish to partake in this national process, as most of them seem bent on doing, they will have little to contribute to culture.

From whatever angle the dilemma is viewed, the cultural life of society stands to diminish. As long as a society's best minds are being consumed by either petty bureaucratic chores or political problems—no matter how vital and immediate they appear—there will always be a shortage in that segment of our brainpower which could be potential creators of culture. At the risk of some exaggeration, it may be said that what exists today in the Arab

world is a politically-conscious and bureaucratic intelligentsia, and not a culture-conscious intellectual elite.

“Mass Culture” vs. “High Culture”

The invasion of the mass media has not spared the cultural life in the Arab world. More people now than ever before have access to TV, radios, paperbacks, and other inexpensive periodicals and magazines. With increasing exposure, Arab intellectuals are beginning to share the anxieties of their Western colleagues about the vulgarity of popular culture in a mass society. True, with strong communal and kinship ties, Arab society is certainly far from becoming a “mass society,” yet there is a danger in entrusting culture to commercial agencies. Some of the spirited young intellectuals are justifiably concerned lest their own countrymen pass swiftly from illiteracy to popular culture without an intervening period of slow and genuine cultivation of the arts and sciences.

Symptoms of this danger can already be discerned. To many university graduates, popular periodicals as *Time*, *Life* and *Newsweek* are their prime links with the external world. They are not only an information medium, but a source of new tastes in consumption, styles of life and ideas. Furthermore, in a highly mobile society, any object charged with social meaning can readily serve as a symbol of status. Culture, or the appearance of being cultured, is increasingly becoming (at least among the more modern segments of urban Beirut), a status symbol. In the course of a mundane conversation people can casually drop names like Baudelaire, Proust, and Kafka without ever having read any of them. We patronize the arts and attend musical festivals just to be seen there. We invest in encyclopedias and home libraries as mantle or conversation pieces. In short, intellectual snobs feign an interest in intellectual concerns as a short-cut to status.

In much the same way, the utilitarian interest in higher education is not only evident in the predisposition for practical, empirical and technical training, but also in the way symbols of education are coveted for the titles and prestige they carry. In Lebanon, for example, academic titles are so passionately sought and claimed one cannot help but feel that it is the outward prestige value and not the inherent intellectual value of education

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which is the prized object. The deference with which people act toward holders of such titles and the almost flagrant exhibitionism with which they are indulgently displayed is further proof of the snob appeal of higher education. Almost everyone becomes an "ustaz" (teacher or master), and the badge of admission for such a title is often no more than a non-manual job, with or without a college degree. Many sport calling cards with whatever symbols of status they can claim ostentatiously displayed. Special license plates carry the insignia of doctors, lawyers, and pharmacists; other professional groups are enviously beginning to claim similar privileges. Not only letterheads but nameplates for homes and apartments often display all the degrees and titles one has earned or made claims to. Men, even scholars in academic communities where titles abound and should be taken for granted, are careful to address each other in a pompous and ceremonial fashion.

The helpless intellectual views all this with mixed feelings. He recognizes the virtues of the mass media as agents of social and cultural change, yet he is also painfully aware of their corrupting influences in debasing the standards of "high culture." He is torn between his loyalties to his own creative impulses and modes of self-expression, and the temptations of popular appeal and commercial success. By yielding to the temptation of mass appeal, he betrays some of his intellectual values; by maintaining the standards of quality and exclusiveness, he runs the risk of not reaching a wider audience. In a society where intellectual resources are scarce, the tensions inherent in this dilemma are understandably more acute. If the Arab intellectual feels troubled, it is because he appears helpless in reconciling his inner promptings as an intellectual with his civic obligations to be socially useful.

III. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Like other societies in transition, the Arab world today is in the throes of deep and continuous change. Numerous new processes and events underlie its social structure. Some changes have taken a swift and alarming pace: new forms of communication, increasing exposure to the mass media, decline in kinship and other forms of traditional authority, emergence of new social

movements and power elites, emancipation of women, increasing economic and political participation have all created new problems which require comprehension and adjustment. Naturally these changing processes require new solutions and experimentation. The fact that Western societies underwent this very same change earlier does not necessitate that we adopt the same yardsticks or frames of reference and apply them indiscriminately. Selective adaptation and not wholesale application is required.

In this time of transition and uncertainty we need intellectual power and virtue more than ever before. We need the critical support and dedicated energy of people consumed by the passion for reason; people who live for and by the exercise of the intellect. After all, it was the intellectuals and the middle class from which they emerged that were responsible for most of these transformations.

Perhaps the new generation of foreign-trained and college-bred intellectuals imbued with the values of rationality and freedom can fill this gap in our cultural life. Thus far this has been more promise than achievement. As was shown, intellectuals not only lack the cohesion and self-awareness of a social group, but they enjoy relatively little status and practically no intellectual freedom to exercise any real independence of mind and creativity. They are also gripped by some underlying dilemmas which strain their role and relationship with society.

To begin with, they are expected to fuse the compatible elements of the traditional and modern culture. In concrete terms this involves the task of expressing "traditional sentiments in modern idioms, to assimilate and transform traditional attitudes and to mold them into modern genres."¹⁸ Second, they are expected to reconcile their role as detached scholars or disinterested observers with their eagerness to participate in the social and political struggles of their society. This is also a difficult task. Among other things, it involves striking a balance between their loyalties to Arab nationalism and the equally demanding urge for being culturally creative. Finally, they must resolve the dilemma of

¹⁸ Edward Shils, "Further Thoughts on Tradition and Modernity," in *The Problems of Afro-Asian States*, published by *Encounter* for the Congress for Cultural Freedom, 1961, p. 64.

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how to diffuse culture to the widest possible audience without debasing its aesthetic content.

All these are forbidding tasks which tax the meager supply of brainpower. Only by maintaining a kind of balance or reconciliation between these efforts can we ease the tensions or guarantee a more equitable distribution and fruitful utilization of intellectual resources in society. So far we are still far from realizing this goal. And it is unlikely that we can get any closer to it if we persist in our present course of channelling all the emotional and intellectual energies of younger intellectuals in the direction of economic and political problems. When one considers the sacrifices that our developing societies undergo in producing a single intellectual, and when one considers the wastage and rapid obsolescence of brainpower, one cannot but lament such an imbalance of intellectual resources. In a sense, the decline in the cultural level of Arab civilization may in part be a reflection of the overoccupation of Arab intellectuals with the political and social struggles of their societies. Since this is an inevitable, and hopefully a transitional condition, little is gained by acquiring an apologetic attitude. Indulging in intellectual chauvinism, be it in the form of idealizing the heights of our past cultural glories or debasing those of others, can be of little help either. Instead we should avoid the confusion of culture and politics altogether. A rootless class of half-educated technocrats and political intelligentsia is no substitute for an intellectual elite—the creators and carriers of culture.

Finally, in spite of the troubled life he leads and the heavy claims he is saddled with, the longings of the Arab intellectual are not too demanding or unrealistic. He is not longing for Plato's Republic, one in which philosophers would be kings and kings philosophers. Neither does he harbor visions of a Machiavellian sort of world where intellectuals consort with Princes. All that he longs for is some modest recognition of the values of rationality and freedom. Not only intellectual freedom from indiscreet censor bureaus or tyrannical bureaucratic structures, but also some freedom or "elbow room" to seek spontaneous outlets for self-expression and self-definition. These longings, it must be remembered, cannot be quelled by the slogans for social reform, economic prosperity and political stability.