

LEFTIST THOUGHT AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN THE MENA REGION: A BIBLIOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

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This paper provides a bibliographic overview and critical account of some of the most influential figures and publications in postcolonial Marxist and leftist thought and social activism in North Africa and the Middle East since the 1960s.

The Moroccan philosopher and historian Abdallah Laroui (1933-) is one of the most influential voices in post-colonial North Africa and the Middle East. His widely influential *L'Idéologie arabe contemporaine* (1967) [*Contemporary Arab Ideology*] has marked generations of thinkers and activists in the region. The fact that the book was published in the same year as the Arab defeat in the Six Day War has added to its significance. Laroui was among the first post-colonial intellectuals to explore the cultural and historical roots of the deep underdevelopment and crises of the MENA region. With a preface by the well-known scholar of Islam Maxime Rodinson, Laroui's book sought to answer many key questions about how Arab thought had responded the radical transformations of this part of the world since the beginning of European colonisation at the turn of the nineteenth century. The colonial experience combined with erratic post-colonial attempts at industrialization and nation-building have marked Arab thinkers. Laroui's first major book manages to provide a critical history of the major movements of modern thought in the Maghreb and the Middle East since the mid-nineteenth century. He identifies one common thread in the plethora of thought movements: the relationship with the West. Laroui demonstrates how these societies and their thinkers have defined themselves vis-à-vis Western civilization. This relationship, which lies at the centre of Arab ideology, allows the author to show

how the Arabs view their past and present as they project the future. The crisis of this ideology lies in the fact that Arabs have internalised the precepts of Western culture and their struggle for self-definition and existence has therefore to go through this internalised conflict of cultures and identities. Laroui's materialist perspective places this conflict at the centre of the Arab world's current tragedy in that it exists and defines itself as inferior to the West. This uneven relationship upholds Western hegemony at the economic and cultural levels. Laroui identifies three main camps in the Arab response to this situation: the religious scholars (e.g., Mohamed Abduh) who consider Islam to be superior to the West despite imperialism and economic domination; the liberal intellectual and politician (e.g., Lotfy Sayyid) who blame this situation on the Ottoman Empire's subordination of the MENA region for centuries; and, finally, the technophile (Salama Musa) who consider that the West's superiority is due to its technical supremacy. The legacy of these three schools of thought are still visible in the Maghreb and the Middle East today.

Laroui's next major study ***La Crise des intellectuels arabes: traditionalisme ou historicisme?*** (1974) [*The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual: Traditionalism Or Historicism?*] provides a critical account of the meaning of the contemporary in Arab intellectual history. Laroui identifies four periods in modern Arab intellectual history: 1) *Nahda* or the great Arab renaissance period from 1850 to 1914. The Nahdathinkers sought through translation vulgarization to popularise the great achievements of the modern West; 2) the period between the two world wars was marked by the emergence of ideas which played a crucial role in social and nationalist movements; 3) the period the Arab nationalist experiments on the unionist ideology; and 4) the period of moral and political crisis after the great defeat in the Six Day War of 1967. Laroui's main thesis is that the concept of history is in fact peripheral to all the ideologies that have dominated the Arab world to this day. Laroui calls for the establishment of universalism, historicism, modernism, rationalism and

positivism in Arab society and thought.

Mohamed Abd al-Jabri's magnum opus ***Naqd al-'Aql al-Arabi*** (1982) [*Critique of Arab Reason*] has exercised broad influence on an entire generation of North African and Middle Eastern thinkers, students and politicians. Al-Jabri (1935-2010) was actively engaged in political movements in Morocco and in the Arab world. In July 1963, he was briefly jailed for his leftist activities. He later served as a leading member of Morocco's main socialist party "Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires" (USFP). However, he grew increasingly dissatisfied with dominant ideologies from socialism through Marxism to liberalism. He turned to classical Islamic thought for fresh resources necessary for political and intellectual renewal in his country and beyond. His major influence was Ibn Roshd. In consequence, he tended to uphold the rational lucidity of "Western Islam" (prevalent in Maghreb) over the mystical tendencies of the "Eastern Islam" of the Mashreq. He thus privileges "*burhan*" (deductive reasoning) and "*bayan*" (linguistic analysis) over "*irfan*" (mystical reading). *Critique of Arab Reason* began to appear in 3 volumes in Beirut starting in 1982. The 3 volumes of the project are: "The Genesis of Arab Thought" (1984); "The Structure of the Arab Mind" (1986); and "The Arab Political Mind" (1990). The trilogy exemplifies al-Jabri's effort to steer a course between or beyond religious fundamentalism, on the one hand, and secularist dismissal of religious thought, on the other. As he puts it, his aim was to overcome "the current polarization of Arab [or Islamic] thought" between "an imported modernism" that entirely disregards Islamic traditions and (on the other side) an "Arab traditionalism or fundamentalism" that assures Arabs or Muslims of a spurious identity through nostalgic retrievals of the past. In this materialist perspective, Al-Jabri held that religious revelation is addressed to human beings in their concrete historical situation and hence can be validly understood only by taking historical and social context into account. Besides the role of

context, this multiplicity is also a result of the internal complexity and diversity of traditions, including religious traditions. The pursuit of his critical initiative places al-Jabri in the company not only of early Arab philosophy (especially the Mu'tazilites and Ibn Rushd) but also in that of prominent Nahda reformers of the 19th century, as we saw above with Abdallah Laroui.

The Syrian writer and philosopher Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm (1934-) is one of the most influential thinkers and political activists in the MENA region since the 1960s. His main area of influence is the relationship between the Islamic world and the West. His ***Al-Nakd al-Dhati Ba'da al-Hazima*** (1968) [*Self-Criticism After the Defeat*] is a critical account of the impact of the Six Day War on Arab societies and culture. In the following year, he published ***Naqd al-Fikr al-Dini*** [*Critique of Religious Thought*]. As documented by Stefan Wild in his essay "God and Man in Lebanon: The Sadiq Al-Azm Affair" (1971), Al-Azm was arrested and jailed in Beirut on charges of fuelling sectarian feuds in Lebanon. In this book, he delivers a powerful critique of the leaders of Lebanon's various religious sects and their use of the media to exploit the religious sentiments of their communities. This book exemplified his Marxist-materialist critique of religion and exposed how "Arab regimes found in religion a crutch they could use to calm down the Arab public and cover-up for their incompetence and failure laid bare by the defeat, by adopting religious and spiritual explanations for the Israeli victory." Al-Azm was eventually released from prison due to the lack of criminal elements against him. *Critique of Religious Thought* has been translated into many languages and still enjoys broad influence in the Middle East despite restricted access.

Al-Azm rose to prominence again in the next decade as a critic of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). In his 1981 essay "**Orientalism and orientalism in reverse,**" he claims that Said essentialises the West, thus falling into the same trap of essentializing 'the East' by the imperial

powers and their scholars. As he puts it, "the stylist and polemicist in Edward Said very often runs away with the systematic thinker. As a result he does not consistently adhere to the above approach either in dating the phenomenon of Orientalism or in interpreting its historical origins and ascent. In an act of retrospective historical projection we find Said tracing the origins of Orientalism all the way back to Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides and Dante. In other words, Orientalism is not really a thoroughly modern phenomenon, as we thought earlier, but is the natural product of an ancient and almost irresistible European bent of mind to misrepresent the realities of other cultures, peoples, and their languages, in favour of Occidental self-affirmation, domination and ascendancy. Here the author seems to be saying that the 'European mind', from Homer to Karl Marx and A.H.R. Gibb, is inherently bent on distorting all human realities other than its own and for the sake of its own aggrandisement."

Edward Said's ***Orientalism*** (1978) is one of the landmark books published in the last century. It was well received by Arab thinkers and activists on the Left despite some apprehensions from thinkers like Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm. Using a Foucauldian approach, Said examines the origins and ongoing legacy of Orientalism, a term he recast to describe the West's patronizing perceptions and depictions of "the East". The central thesis of *Orientalism* is the existence of a "subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture." This system of misrepresentation derives from Western culture's long tradition of distorted images of Asia, in general, and the Middle East, in particular. As a series of false images and a tool of imperial domination, Orientalism has served, and continues to serve, as justifications for the colonial ambitions of the European powers and of the U.S. According to the Palestinian-American Said, Orientalist scholarship is inextricably tied to the imperialist societies that produced it, which makes much of this work inherently political and deeply servile to power.

Orientalism also lays bare how Arab elites have internalised Orientalist representations of their societies. Grounded in Said's in-depth knowledge of colonial knowledge and contemporary West-East power relations, *Orientalism* and following works remain influential in literary theory and criticism, and continue to shape several other fields in the modern humanities.

Published for the first time in 1988, Samir Amin's ***Eurocentrism*** has become a classic of radical thought. This book takes on Eurocentrism as one of the great "ideological deformations" of modern times. Amin deconstructs the dominant Eurocentric view of world history, which rests on the assumption of a progression from the Greek and Roman classical world to Christian feudalism and the European capitalist system. He counters this vision by presenting a sweeping reinterpretation that emphasizes the crucial historical role played by the Islamic world. He addresses the ideological nature of scholastic metaphysics, the implications and shortcomings of contemporary Islamic fundamentalism, and Third World nationalism. Amin advocates a new economic, cultural, and political world order founded on "socialist universalism," a truly universal and rational paradigm of world government able to overcome the contradictions inherent in global capitalism.

Aijaz Ahmad's collection of essays ***In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*** (1994) is one of the essential references in postcolonial and Marxist in recent times. Ahmad recasts the terrain of postcolonial cultural theory in this influential volume. Nationalism emerged after World War II as the fundamental expression of resistance to Western imperialism in a variety of regions from the Indian subcontinent to the MENA region, to parts of Latin America and the Pacific Rim. "Third World literature" emerged as a critical category in the historical context of decolonization. This critical category has itself spawned a whole industry of scholarly and critical studies, particularly

in Western academia, but increasingly in the global South itself. Ahmad deconstructs the growing tendency to homogenise “Third World” literature and cultures. Arguing against postmodernist and poststructuralist currents in postcolonial studies and their neglect of politics and economics, he delivers a materialist critique of the major theoretical statements on “colonial discourse” and “post-colonialism” and dismantles many of the commonplaces and conceits that dominate contemporary cultural criticism.

In his widely influential work ***Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*** (1988), Hisham Sharabi examines the economic, political, social, and cultural transformations that engendered neopatriarchal systems in the MENA region and other developing countries. He defines neopatriarchy as a modernised form of traditional culture rather than a progression toward industrial and secular modernity. Sharabi outlines a theory of social change that demystifies the setbacks the Arab world has experienced in the blocked transition from patriarchy or traditional culture to secularism and modernity. He shows how *authentic* change was blocked and distorted forms and practices subsequently came to dominate all aspects of social existence and activity. He gives the example of religious fundamentalism as an ideological symptom of neopatriarchal culture. Posing as the only valid option, radical Islam now confronts the elements calling for secularism and democracy in a bitter battle whose outcome is likely to determine the future of the Arab world as well as that of other Muslim societies around the world.

Mahdi Amel was a prominent Marxist theorist, journalist and political figure in Lebanon before his assassination in 1987 at the age of 51. The Arab Gramsci was a prolific writer and trenchant critic of the crisis of Arab society in his native Lebanon and beyond. He authored

several books and hundreds of articles during and after the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). Among his notable writings is ***Naqd al-Fikr al-Yawmi*** (1988) [*The Critique of Everyday Thought*]. In it, he examines the roots of the Lebanese Civil War and the wider causes of the impasse of Arab civilisation. His Marxist critique of sectarianism and religious thought influenced other thinkers and young generations of students from Rabat to Baghdad. Amel sought to produce original Marxist interpretations grounded in Arab reality. He also started an original project which consisted of revisiting some of the landmark figures of the region. In this vein, he wrote a seminal study called ***Fi 'ilmiat al-Fikr al-Khalduni*** (1985) [*On the Scientific of Ibn Khaldun's Thought*]. Amel's remarkable studies have inspired dozens of studies and influenced an entire generation of thinkers in the region.

Hassan Hanafi (1935-) is one of the most influential Arab thinkers working today. The Cairo-based professor of philosophy is often associated with the so-called "Islamic Left." He was a supporter of the Islamic Brotherhood in his youth, but he has established himself as a socialist Islamic scholar and thinker since 1967, when he returned to Egypt after obtaining his PhD in philosophy from the Sorbonne University in Paris. Hanafi's published books show a strong erudition in the Islamic tradition, which he interprets to support revolutionary politics and the need for action to move beyond the current crisis of the Islamic world. This is a political project with great risks in contemporary Egypt. His ***Da'wa ila al-Hiwar*** (2000) [*An Invitation to Dialogue*] has been attacked by Islamic clerics and scholars, who accused Hanafi of apostasy because of his liberal interpretations of Islam. In recent times, Hanafi has devoted many of his works and interventions to opening Islam to embrace global ethics, progress and human rights.

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943-2010) was another prominent figure of the "Islamic Left" with

remarkable influence beyond the borders of his native Egypt. An early sympathiser of the Muslim Brotherhood like Hasan Hanafi, this controversial Quranic scholar educated at Al Azhar was a leading liberal theologian of Islam. His main legacy is his project of a humanistic Qur'anic hermeneutics. In 1993, Islamist attacks on his academic critique of the Quran led an Egyptian court to accuse him of apostasy, a serious crime in Islamic countries. He subsequently divorced from Dr. Ibtihal Younis, a French Literature professor at Cairo University, where Abu Zayd was refused promotion to a full professorship on political grounds. Things went from bad to worse for the socialist theologian as he had to flee his homeland, but his scholarly output kept coming and became more poignant over the years as he gained significant readership in the MENA region and beyond. Among his notable publications is *Naqd al-Khiṭāb al-Dīnī* (1994) [*Critique of Religious Discourse*]. This book outlines Abu Zayd's humanistic hermeneutics of Islam through a progressive reading of Islam based on the right to personal interpretation of religious texts. This Protestant reading undermined the authority of Islamic clerics, who are the spiritual vanguard of the political regimes across the MENA region. His Marxist hermeneutic view of the Qur'an further established that it should be interpreted within the historical and cultural context of its time. In this hermeneutic reading, the Quran becomes a living phenomenon, a discourse like any other discourse. As he puts it, the Qur'an can be "the outcome of dialogue, debate, despite argument, acceptance and rejection." Thus Abu Zayd finds in the Quran subversive socialist elements that go against the grain of the clerics' monolithic approach to it as the Text.

After the first generation of postcolonial Marxist thinkers influenced by decolonisation and the rapid transformations of Marxist thought in the post-WWII era, new voices began to emerge in 1980s. These new thinkers have been influenced by the failure of postcolonial states and the triumph of capitalism and market ideologies after the Cold War. This new generation of Marxist

authors from the MENA regions were markedly influenced by other schools of postcolonial leftist thought, particularly the Subaltern Studies Group in India. In ***Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn (2007)***, the prominent sociologist Asef Bayat advances that democratic ideals have less to do with the essence of any religion than with how it is practiced. The book offers a new approach to Islam and democracy in academic scholarship by investigating how the social struggles of youth, student organizations, women's groups and several other social movements in North Africa and the Middle East can make Islam democratic. Adopting a comparative perspective on Islamism, post-Islamism, and active religious expression, Bayat examines the contested relationship between politics, religion and the everyday across the region. Bayat looks in detail at those social movements that have used religion to provoke social and political change, either to bestow legitimacy on authoritarian rule or to construct an inclusive faith that embraces the principles of democratic politics. He offers an innovative account of Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution. He shows how it has evolved into the post-Islamist reform movement of the early twenty-first century, and how it is markedly different from Egypt's religious "passive revolution." In so doing, *Making Islam Democratic* provides an important understanding of the great anxiety of our time—fundamentalist Islam—and gives hope of a democratic Middle East.

An influential text on social movements in the Middle East, Asef Bayat's ***Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*** (2010) deconstructs the popular image of the Muslim Middle East as frozen in its own traditions and history. He shows how it is actually a land of lively social and political movements. The book demonstrates how under the cover of the authoritarian rule, economic elites, and religious moral authorities, ordinary people enact meaningful change through the subtle practices of everyday life. Millions of youth and ordinary people across the region are constantly producing new social spaces within which to make their claims and rights

visible. Although not coordinated in their activities, these "non-movements" of ordinary people from street vendors to squatters provide a political response, not of protest or revolution but rather of practice and direct everyday resistance and action.

Salwa Ismail is a London-based academic with growing influence on leftist thought and social activism in her native MENA region. Her ***Rethinking Islamist Politics. Culture, the State and Islamism*** (2003) shows how Islamism is a radically diverse and complex phenomenon rooted in the everyday political economy of these societies. Ismail outlines a new way of thinking about Islamist politics by showing how it is determined by micro- and macro-level transformations in the region. These deep transformations range from structural adjustment policies introduced in the 1980s and the consequent retreat of the welfare state, and the subsequent expansion in the role of informal political activism in the popular neighbourhoods of major cities such as Cairo. Ismail manages to examine the socio-economic and political settings behind the rise of Islamism. She frames Islamism as a form of contestation politics and shows some of its failures and successes on the ground due to the use of violence despite its capacity for mobilisation at a popular level. Ismail reveals how Islamism is part of the everyday struggles of ordinary people against oppressive political and economic regimes. In her next major study ***Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters*** (2006), Ismail reveals a rich array of mobilizations that neither lead inexorably toward democratization nor degenerate into violence. The book is enriched by Ismail's rich ethnography of youth, informal economic activity, gender and the everyday state in Cairo's new urban quarters. This strong empirical base allows for a nuanced understanding of the "state" and the relationships between the rulers and the ruled in a major city in a region where there was little sign of broad-based movements for democratization until the mass uprisings of 2010-11.

Tarik Sabry is one of the rising figures in Arab cultural studies with a penchant for fieldwork-based insights into the present crisis of Arab society and culture. Sabry combines his erudition in modern Arab thought with empirical case studies across North Africa to articulate a new critique of the global present from the perspective of ordinary youth and marginalized social groups. He outlines the intellectual and empirical sources of his project in ***Cultural Encounters in the Arab World: On Media, the Modern and the Everyday*** (2010). This journey in modern thought and the everyday life of sample social groups in Casablanca and Cairo reveals the common structures of feeling in and affective politics of neoliberal urban space in the years leading to the so-called Arab Spring. Sabry followed up with the edited volume ***Arab Cultural Studies: Mapping the Field*** (2012). The book brings together original reflections on economy, gender, history, epistemology, method, politics, language, literary and cultural criticism across the region. The contributors engage with complex epistemological and methodological questions facing a nascent field of leftist cultural critique. This critique shows continuities with the secular project of Arab thinkers explored in the first part of this bibliographical survey, on the one hand, and demonstrates the great potential of cultural studies for progressive thought and social activism in and beyond the MENA region.