

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

September 12, 2017

Frozen Concepts and the Pathos of Propriety in the Logic of Singularity

Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda*, Cambridge University Press, 2016, 458 pp., \$120.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781107136335.

This world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel.
— Horace Walpole

Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age can be viewed as a culmination of the feverish explosion of what has been called “*Nahda* studies” in the past decades. The compulsion to re-enact the *Nahda* is declared in fidelity to Albert Hourani’s legacy for the intellectual history of the Arabic speaking world. However, the editors, Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, in their distinctly postcolonial theoretical framing of the book, depart radically from the tradition of intellectual history Hourani worked within. In this regard, the volume can be seen to pay homage to Hourani by bidding him farewell. Although presented as the proceedings of a conference held at Princeton University in Hourani’s honor (October 2012), the plan for an intellectual history of Arabic thought proposed by the editors is tethered to their framing in the introduction, which will be the main object of scrutiny here. Due to its significance, this review will focus primarily on the problematics posed by the editors’ theoretical framing of the intellectual history of the *Nahda*, and only secondarily on the individual contributions included in the volume. For it is in the introduction that the editors lay down a framework for rethinking Arabic intellectual history through positing the *Nahda* as a global concept (37).

In their introduction, Weiss and Hanssen lead the reader down a winding path upon which the historical and the logical are intertwined in a thorny thicket of references: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Virilio, Bloch, Koselleck, Foucault, Eley, Habermas, and Berque. The historiography of the *Nahda* is presented as having been “mind-centered, positivist, and semanticist” before the “cultural turn” or the literariness of Arabic thought had been established, i.e., before the specific postcolonial analyses of Joseph Masad, Jeffrey Sacks, and Tarek El-Ariss culminating in Weiss and Hanssen’s exposé presented here as inheritor of this

genealogy.¹ The fundamental premise of the Introduction is the singularity of an Arab thought defined by the editors as “reason’s other,” and one in which, they claim, imagination and intuition take precedence over the faculty of reason, understood here as a force of colonial domination. The Arab mind is singular both in terms of its faculties and their organization. Moreover, another layer of perplexity is added: in tandem with their claim that the Arab mind is “reason’s other,” the editors still wish to maintain a global concept of *Nahda*, or a “global Nahda” (37), as necessary and essential. How we are supposed to attain such a concept on the basis of intuition and imagination remains unexplained, except for a passing reference to Kant via Spivak. It is necessary to scrutinize further the criteria by which Hanssen and Weiss make their argument before a final adjudication is reached concerning the premises of their theoretical intervention. It is important to first show how Hanssen and Weiss’s volume fundamentality departs from Hourani’s theoretical principles, as he inherited them from Collingwood.

Hourani’s own main influence, R.G. Collingwood, posited re-enactment as an essential component of the historian’s task. Collingwood’s quasi-Hegelian argument was “that all history is the history of thought, and that the historian knows a past thought by re-enacting it in the present.”² This method of history by which the historian must interpolate the past through a re-construction is certainly a form of idealism: Collingwood’s philosophy of history, arguably one of the major twentieth century influences on the modern field of intellectual history, perceives of its object of study, human thought, as governed by the universal principles of reason. For Collingwood “to be rational is to think,”³ and it is only in the realm of history, and not nature, that freedom becomes a necessity: “historical thought, thought about rational activity, is free from the domination of natural science, and rational activity is free from the domination of nature.”⁴ Ultimately, the historian can study a distant situation *because* of the premise that rational action is free to build its world of human affairs, *res gestae*, at its own bidding. Historical thinking is what brings about the possibility of resolving problems confronted in the past, such that in Collingwood’s words, “if we want to abolish capitalism or war, and in doing so not only destroy them but [...] bring into existence something better, we must begin by understanding them.”⁵ The understanding of a phenomenon is thus necessary for its supersession and is what conditions the future.

For a philosophy of history (or historical thinking *tout court*) to exist—without which history would simply be an anachronistic form of *historia magistrae vitae*—it must be governed by a body of “universal and necessary” thought.⁶ Far from being positivistic and empiricist, as the editors deem intellectual history before the cultural and literary turn, intellectual history is about the construction of a narrative that is intended to be true (a dictum that surely chills the spines of postcolonial pundits who equate truth with domination). Its truthfulness is measured by the ideal that is present for the historian while constructing the narrative. The standards by which a historical work is subjected to criticism are universality

¹ See: Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Jeffrey Sacks, *Iterations of Loss: Mutilation and Aesthetic Form, Al-Shidyq to Darwish* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); and Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

² R.G. Collingwood, *Notes on Historiography, The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946). 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 316.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 334.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 335.

and necessity, without which a historical epistemology that is purely relative is merely solipsistic: “though it would be entirely false to say that solipsism is un-answerable, it is true enough that it cannot be answered until it is recognized for what it is, and the principles underlying it brought to light.”⁷ Collingwood’s importance for providing the grounds for the burgeoning field of global intellectual history⁸ cannot be ignored—despite all the unanswered problematics of the global as a concept-space⁹—because he insists that the different narratives of history can only be compared by exposing the principles or philosophical grounds upon which they are constructed. These principles are what must be brought forth and criticized in order for historical thinking to be possible.

These fundamental principles of historical thinking are denied to the Arabic “mind” in Hanssen and Weiss’s schema for an intellectual history of *Nabda* because this “mind” is singular and unique precisely insofar as it is doomed to oscillate between capital’s antinomial pair of culturalism and liberalism.¹⁰ Although necessary, the shift from Hourani’s perspective, which was influenced by idealism cannot be conceived without a materialist critique. Capital as a historically specific form of social totality not only instantiates liberal political economy, it also allows for the endurance and transmission of particular concepts and practices. Consequently Andrew Sartori’s materialist critique of the postcolonial paradigm is essential for a global intellectual historical perspective: “the acknowledgement of continuity remains crucially incomplete until we also acknowledge that the reproduction of those indigenous repertoires of practice and thought was necessarily mediated in turn by wider historical transformations.”¹¹ Colonial subjects, with their concrete practices are ultimately drawn into global structures of interdependence that characterize capital. This means that the postcolonial paradigm of analysis does not suffice for rethinking intellectual histories if it assumes that forms of continuity need to be analyzed against modernity. Against this approach, a historical critique must be able to employ the adequate analytic categories for understanding continuity in the context of capital’s organization of social life.

Upon reading Hanssen and Weiss’s introduction, the reader is baffled by the confusion between universalizability, the *Nabda* as concept, and singularity. On their account, the *Nabda* can be recognized as a global concept only via an intellectual history tethered to the increasingly hegemonic methods of social constructivism and historicist epistemology in postcolonial studies, the social sciences, and the humanities. The aim of the volume, as

⁷ Ibid., 343.

⁸ Prasenjit Duara, Viren Murthy, and Andrew Sartori, eds., *Companion to Global Historical Thought* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 1.

⁹ See Andrew Sartori’s *Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014). Also relevant here is Eric Santner’s distinction between global and universal consciousness: “for global consciousness, conflicts are generated through external differences between cultures and societies whereas universality...signifies the possibility of a shared opening to the agitation and turbulence immanent to any construction of identity, the *Unheimlichkeit* or uncanniness internal to any and every space we call home” (*On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001], 5).

¹⁰ See Andrew Sartori’s, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008). In this book Sartori constructs an intellectual history of the concept of culture as a translation of determinate objects of discourse formations (education, custom, sign systems) into concrete manifestations that are not restricted to the signifying capacities of any language (45). For Sartori, the concept of culture is not about de-provincializing Europe, but is what emerges in local contexts in an attempt to make sense of a new object of thought: the social abstraction of Capital. In other words, culture cannot simply be read as a “Europeanization” of the conceptual universe of societies the world over, but as what “has served to de-Europeanize the concepts that constitute the now global thought forms of modernity.”

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

proclaimed by the editors, is the advancement of a contextualist approach in intellectual history, “against Eurocentrism” (37). This “new Arab intellectual history needs to push further research in pluralizing, politicizing, and radicalizing a global *Nabda* across the colonial divide between the West and the rest” (37). The global *Nabda*, according to the editors, is presented in the individual book chapters which are read as “variations of what Dipesh Chakrabarty memorably called ‘provincializing Europe’, i.e., accepting the impact of global circulations of ideas, people, and goods on local and regional historical processes without necessarily subjecting them to a European frame of analysis” (37).

This claim for the singularity of Arabic thought is symptomatic of postcolonial theory, and we need only refer back to Peter Hallward’s critical study *Absolutely Postcolonial* to elucidate its premises.¹² Hallward shows how postcolonial analysis, whose starting point is the essential plurality of subject positions, whether Muslim, Arab, Indian, or Bengali, etc., is not, as is so often claimed, heterogeneous and multiple, but singular and singularizing. These subjects do not belong to a particular place and are not constrained by any logic beyond that of their own immanent criteria. The singularizing logic of postcolonial analysis is fundamentally linked to global capital, which in turn assumes the logic of singularity for the market. The singular is endowed with immediacy, it is free from mediation, it is “constituent of itself, expressive of itself, immediate to itself,”¹³ and it is ultimately a singularity best expressed by God, the creator who incarnates in his creatures. The singular as such is in direct opposition to the universal: while the former creates (whether as Big Bang, God, proletariat, Stalin, subaltern, or invisible hand of the market), the latter prescribes: “The Singular is involved in its own genesis, it is self-constituent, an ongoing differentiation, whereas a universal principle is imposed in a specific situation through a particular intervention [...] the singular always harks back to a form of effectively divine or non-relational Creative power (a creationist power which creates its own medium of existence or expression), [whereas] universals are posited so as to enable relational consistency.”¹⁴

Thus, it is not enough to conflate capitalism with colonial rule: direct domination should not be conflated with abstract domination, i.e., domination cannot be reduced to “epistemic violence” without accounting for the ways in which Capital organizes social life. If concrete social practices are mediated by capitalist social forms (commodities and values), how can we deduce universal claims from particular concrete social practices? As Andrew Sartori remarks in his seminal critique of Partha Chatterjee’s analysis of coloniality, “we must find a way to displace the practical agency of colonial discourse from the position of explanatory primacy that it holds in the literature of post-colonialism.”¹⁵ Discursive practices do have constitutive social effects; nevertheless, we cannot overlook the logically prior historical constitution of discourses in the specific historical context of capitalist integration: *Nabda*, like all other cultural formations, is internal to capitalist social forms and all the attempts to trace it back to pre-modern, authentic or indigenous roots obfuscate the historical specificity of the concept of culture (which in *Nabda* uses oscillated between *tamaddun* and *adab*) to Capital.

Moreover, “epistemic violence” cannot be simply countered with an epistemic relativism which in the process of abjuring epistemic absolutes of any kind renders the construction of

¹² Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵ Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History*, 16.

the very notion of an epistemic system null.¹⁶ Hanssen and Weiss's references to Wittgenstein clearly situates their intervention within the relativist camp; one that ultimately assumes that knowledge can be affirmed only when it complies to specified social value, giving one a sense of being at home in the world and affirming a *weltanschauung*. This relativism, although meant to protect the particular and oppressed from the powerful, also renders the critique of the powerful impossible precisely because of the incommensurability it postulates between the singularity of Arabic thought and its Western other.

According to the Hanssen and Weiss, not only did Hourani provide us with four major concepts that remain essential for the present historical moment, it is only by re-formulating Hourani's four-fold schema (of Mind, Time, Language, and Freedom) in postcolonial terms that we can actualize the potentials of the *Nabda* past, or indeed, that we can actualize *Nabda* itself as a global concept. The disavowal of Hourani's own "Eurocentric" categories only results in the return of a deeper Orientalizing history: the Arabic mind can only be studied as the flipside of reason and rationality, its necessary other. The book poses a two-fold intervention, at once theoretical and historical, but is problematic on both counts: it is a theoretical intervention into global intellectual history mortgaged to historicism and epistemic relativism. It also weaves a historical narrative of a successive constellation of discourse formations that are continuous in Arabic thought and endowed with a cultural particularity rooted in an "Arab time" (29-30). This temporality, according to the editors, is singular because it amounts to a different lived temporality that produces a distinct conceptual universe that defies "neat temporalization" and is posited against "Zeitgeist history" (30). Thus intellectual history of the *Nabda* can only be conceived against the colonial legacy of the West and "situated in circulation of ideas in material and quotidian culture," and in the "political economy of literary production." Again, we are presented with the postcolonial mantra emphasizing the situated, embodied, particular, communitarian, etc. What presents itself as a discourse of plurality turns out to be univocal, premised upon an incommensurability, a non-relational logic that produces text, reader, and meaning all at once. In the midst of all this, what is eclipsed is any possibility of decisive judgment, here subordinated to the importance of feeling complexity.¹⁷ This is why pan-Islamism, Naqshabandi Sufism, Arab nationalism, liberal secularists, protestant ideologues, and Muslim-secularists can all be weighed equally as co-existent cotemporaneous bodies of thought endowed with equal validity for the present. But is not the task of historical thinking precisely the formulation of judgment? If we must censor any mention of European philosophers on the matter (ranging from Hegel to Heidegger and the neo-Kantians), we should at least cite "local" figures who adopted and promoted this understanding of history, such as Constantine Zurayk, who surely cannot be discounted from an intellectual history of Arabic thought.¹⁸ But in the editor's scheme, figures like Zurayk, Hourani, Antonius, and others cannot but be tragic.

¹⁶ See Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Oxford University Press), 94.

¹⁷ Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial*, 39.

¹⁸ Refer to Zurayk's, *Naḥnu wa-al-tārīkh, maṭālib wa-tasā'ulāt fī šinā'at al-tārīkh wa-šan' al-tārīkh* (Dar al-'ilm lil malayīn, 1963). The point of history for Zurayk, is a rational deduction *ta'lil* and ultimately a judgment (*ḥukm*), *al-ḥukm fī al-tārīkh*, that should not be allowed under any condition whatsoever to project a reality unto its representation, *tatbiq al-waqi' ala al-ta'lil*. This judgment for Zurayk in order to be a full historical judgment, *al-ḥukm al-tārīkhī al-kāmil*, has to be a combination of judging according to a relative time measure and according to an accumulation of trans-historical measure that will lead to "understanding, freedom, progress, and the sacredness of human dignity" (152).

If Hourani's *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* is presented as "a watershed in the history and historiography of colonialism and its tortured relation to liberalism" (10), this is only because the editors overlook an important strand in recent scholarship (represented by Andrew Sartori, Samuel Moyn, and Faisal Devji) that demonstrates a necessary relation between colonialism and the emergence of liberalism in the ideas and politics of the colonized themselves. This tortured relation between colonialism and liberalism is presented as tragic and tragedy is understood as what emerges from an "incomplete liberal consciousness" (11). What an "incomplete liberal consciousness" is remains an enigma, especially when the editors maintain that liberal thought itself is not a totality but a contested discourse. The tragedy of Arab intellectuals is understood by the editors, via Adorno and Geoff Eley, as the tragedy of attempting to remain liberal after liberalism's temporary eclipse in Europe. This argument perceives fascism as the result of the failure to fully liberalize society and economy: Israel Gershoni's chapter speaks for this view. Aqqad's reading of Nazism and his analysis of Hitler's psychological profile and politics are lauded for their somewhat anachronistic defense of liberalism against the threat to it embodied by Adolf Hitler. But the relationship between liberalism and fascism cannot be understood outside the context of the shift from industrial capital to financial capital and it is far too reductive to claim that fascism and liberalism are antagonistic pairs or that the latter is a solution to the former. Although it is important to record Arabic responses to Nazism, it is unclear on what grounds Aqqad's anti-Nazism was a distinctly "anti-determinist liberalism" as Gershoni claims. Is it not the standard liberal anti-racist's account, whose promotion Gershoni imputes to Aqqad, that rejects racism's negative evaluation of the Other at the cost of negating Otherness altogether? Further, why is this liberal position important when it pays no attention to the social and historical structures of capital from within which fascism is generated (i.e., to the shift from liberal capitalism to state-centric interventionism in a situation of structural crisis) from within which Fascism is generated?

Most of the chapters in the book do end up salvaging an intellectual history committed to liberalism. In her chapter, Dina Rizk Khoury presents a narrative of the culturalization of politics, together with a coupling of morality and politics, in both Wahhabism and Sufism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during which, she argues, an older discourse of tolerance was revived that needs to be recognized in scholarship. In other words, liberalism in Islam is older than we think. Cemil Aydin's chapter also argues that nineteenth century pan-Islamist thought was essentially modern, and contained "powerful universalist ideals such as the demands for dignity and justice for religious, civilization, and racial groups" (141). Aydin claims that the *Nabda* was not occupied with nationalism but with the issue of the Caliphate and pan-Islamism in reaction to the "European political and social theories reliance on scientific racism, evolutionary paradigms, and civilizing ideologies" (140). Amal Ghazal's chapter presents a conservative strain of thought in Sufism as being "illiberal" and anti-modern, one forged in defense of tradition against the rational order of the reformers (228): the task for figures like al-Nabhani was to reject modernity rather than engage with it. According to Ghazal, al-Nabhani's predictions for Islam have been vindicated by history: the democratization of Islam and the end of the Caliphate are the victory of European modernity. All these different subject-positions however have one thing in common, a specificity that is tethered to their opposing object, the West or Europe. Thus they are identified as subjects that cannot overcome the specified, or the object, and as unable to de-specify and thus overcome objective determination. Here we should recall Fanon's understanding of the decolonizing subject not as a subject possessing some form of innate freedom that pre-exists colonization, waiting to be released by overcoming colonial

restraints, but as a subject that comes into being through a militant process of de-colonization.¹⁹ Despecifying or overcoming race, gender, and other essentialist categories means that a subject can only be relational, “both with-others *and* against others.”²⁰

The singularity of Arabic thought as it is presented in this volume has to be read as part of the micromarketing of particularity in an era of multinational capital: it is premised on the view that the local is immediately articulated with the global, and that the universal is a mere abstraction; whereas both the universal and the particular are in fact mediated through the real abstractions of the market. Ultimately, this volume does not provide us with any criterion by which we can judge the validity in the present of the ideas animating these “specified subjects” (in contradistinction to de-specified subjects); what we have is simply a monistic idea of singularity masquerading as heterogeneity, and one that renders immanent critique unachievable, i.e., the singular cases are symptomatically treated as abstract singularities that are meant to somehow challenge the abstractions of ‘Western’ universality.

The various chapters of the book stage the antinomy of culturalism (pan-Islamism, Sufism, Wahhabism, Arabism, etc.) and liberalism that is characteristic of capitalist modernity.²¹ Most of its contributors argue that the *Nabda’s* liberal legacy must be continued and re-discovered against the political deadlock between nationalism and Islamism in the Arab world, which has “survived the end of ideology” (14), despite the supposed failure of liberalism in Europe itself. The editors argue that the *Nabda’s* importance lies in its distinctly liberal cultural sphere: “*Nabda* as cultural revival and enlightenment premised on the chimera of decline and decadence but unlike their Ottoman predecessors and contemporaries staked their future on change cast predominantly in a reformist mold” (32). This brings us to yet another perplexing problematic: if liberalism is understood as reason’s political ideology, and the *Nabda* can only be defended as a liberal cultural sphere, why and how does rationality then get sequestered from Arabic thought and liberalism celebrated? Moreover, that which in *Nabda* is not liberal appears to be culturalism (practical activity as what constitutes sociality); thus, we are left with an Arabic thought that must be irrational, cultural, and liberal all at once in order to be modern. In other words, Arabic thought is important as a global form of thought only insofar as it is another expression of capitalist modernity.

The editors’ ultimate premise for the study of modern Arabic is a claim for Arabs’ coevalness with modernity, contra Fabian’s denial of coevalness (34), and in line with Virilio’s post-modern concept of dromology (33). Here we are presented yet again with a familiar theoretical constellation which has been consistently promoted by other authors such as Al-Ariss and Sacks: the *Nabda* can only be studied as a process of accumulation of cultural capital that, although suffering from the “epistemological violence” of Orientalism and colonialism (16), has much to offer for thinking “the complex interplay between sense and sensibility, experience and expectation, hope and fear, faith and fantasy” (21).

The scholarship on *Nabda* since Hourani is lauded for having “departed from the mind-centric approach” (21) to thought, and for having introduced the figures of the Muslim, feminine, subaltern, and non-metropolitan. According Hanssen and Weiss, the *Nabda* is of pivotal importance because its study challenges the “colonizing imperative of reason” and speaks for “reason’s others” who cannot “simply be relegated to the realm of the irrational

¹⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris Gallimard, Folio, 1991); *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1991).

²⁰ Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial*, 50.

²¹ Refer to my forthcoming chapter, “Corrupting Politics,” in *Liberalism After Islam*, edited by Faisal Devji and Zaheer Khazmi (Oxford: Hurst-Oxford University Press, 2017).

or the irrelevant” (18). Thus, their volume wants to make a claim for an intellectual history of a highly problematic sort: a “global history” that disowns its own theoretical basis in appeals to the universality of reason and rationality; an intellectual history that is only possible by redefining thinking itself as the object of study of intellectual history: “although thinking is perhaps the defining activity of the intellectual, reason is only one aspect of the life of the mind” since “mental activity also includes intuition and imagination” (18). For Hanssen and Weiss, intuition and imagination are somehow non-universal and have a uniquely Arab particular form; hence their priority over reason, whose universality is read as Eurocentric domination. The rejection of Eurocentrism comes at the cost of a deep-seated Orientalism through which a history of Arab thought can only be possible as un-intellectual: the Occidentalization of reason entails the Orientalization of intuition and imagination. Thus, in a familiar Saidian move, we unwittingly re-affirm a Western projective identification: the East or non-West is reproduced as a projection of Western fantasy; a phantasmatic Other uniquely endowed with imagination, sensibility, and pure experience; without recourse to the “hegemony” of reason and its modern burdens.²² We can only be reminded of Mahdi Amel’s critique of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*,²³ in which Amel argued that Said’s Foucauldian method deprives the so-called East of the very resource it requires for its emancipation from capitalism, namely, rationality. Amel denounced Said’s hermeneutic method as an ideology of the “nationalist bourgeoisie.” The national-bourgeoisie, whom Amel saw Said as representing, ultimately sustained itself by particularist identity politics. For Amel, the problem with particularism is that:

It comes to have its own absolute and eternal reason, the path of the self to the future becomes identical to its path from the present to the past, its sole model. This logic allows for example that Europe has its particular European science and reason and Japan its Japanese science and reason; the same goes for China, Russia, Italy and other nations. Every national entity according to this logic has its own particular science, knowledge, and reason and is a prisoner of its particular identity. Universal science and reason are left to God alone who creates “what ye do not know.”²⁴

²² Alain Grosrichard’s *Sultan’s Court* (London: Verso, 1998) has been eclipsed far too long under the Saidian analysis of Orientalism.

²³ Mahdi Amel, *Is Reason for the West and the Heart for the East?* (Dar al-Farabi, 1978).

²⁴ Mahdi Amel, *Muqadimat nadthariya* [Theoretical Prolegomenon to the Study of the Role of Socialism in National Liberation Movements] (Dar al-Farabi, 1972), Preface, pp. 1-6. In the early 70s Amel positioned his theoretical and political project in direct opposition to dependency theorists, economistic Marxism, Arab nationalist politics, and a rising strain of “bourgeois Islamified intellectuals”—as he called them—in the wake of the Iranian revolution. During the Lebanese civil war and the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982, Amel wrote a series of articles between 1980 and 1986 critiquing a number of contemporary intellectuals. These have been compiled in a volume entitled “The Critique of Everyday Reason.” This remains an untranslated volume but it contains public articles Amel wrote in response to various other thinkers (Heideggarians, deconstructionists, literary authors, Arab nationalists, liberals, and Muslim intellectuals) such as Adonis, Mounir Shafiq, Hazem Saghieh, Hassan al-Diqa, Elias Houry, and Moussa Wehbe. Amel, in the collected articles that make up this volume, publically critiqued what he called “the Islamified bourgeoisie” with a specific focus on the responses to the Iranian revolution and the beginnings of the attack on Marxist thought in the Arab world based on the claim that the specificity of Arab societies was rooted in Islam, by which religion was posited as the driving force of history rather than class struggle. This specific discussion deserves much attention for in it Amel argues that “political Islam” articulated by figures like Mounir Shafiq and others shared the same grounds with liberalism—both being bourgeois politics. It is also not coincidental that Amel’s assassination comes after the

Arab intellectuals like Amel, committed to concrete universality against both the false universality of liberal capitalism and culturalist particularism, clearly cannot figure at all in the schema for a “singular” Arab intellectual history proclaimed by Hanssen and Weiss.

Consequently they argue that language, mind, time, and freedom provide the conceptual constellation through which Arabic thought is de-colonized and released from the fetters of rationality. *Nabda* is at once a linguistic project and a translation project unfolding under the aegis of philology, since language offers an “invisible mode” that is an “anti-cultural essentialism” (17) insofar as thinking happens in language and “words shape concepts but signs are appropriated” and the “rules of language broken” (17). Moreover, for Hanssen and Weiss, this approach to *Nabda* is about perceiving the Arabs not as “an ethnic group but as a community of discourse based on a common language aspect.” (17) Approaching thought through language is meant to elucidate the aporia of colonial epistemologies (16). But if we are to interrogate “thinking-as-language,” is linguistics, rather than philology, not precisely the field which brings the position of the observer into question? Does it not introduce the ontological difference between the synchronic and diachronic and subvert the philological identification of etymology and logic? Or ask for whom they are the same?²⁵

If modern linguistics is precisely the shift away from a substantive to a relational mode of thinking, then how can language in its Arabic singularity be proclaimed as non-relational? For any close reader of *Nabda* sources, it is evident that the problem lies in the displacement of a modern science of language by a pre-modern grammarian tradition; indeed, the poeticism of Shidyaq’s writings can be viewed as a symptom of the limits of language itself as “a house of being?” Does language not expose the incoherence of identity in the *Nabda* obsession with Arabic as an untamable excess that cannot be reduced to a medium of exchange or to Habermasian communicability? Must we then ignore the intellectual problems that preoccupied Shidyaq and other *Nabda* figures in order for a postcolonial intellectual history to be viable? And is the political cost not too high? The anxiety on the part of *Nabda* intellectuals about any resolute self-identification with Arabic surely posits etymology against the “etymo-logos” and introduces the problem of the value of differences without a resolute assumption of a positive substantial content that would be trans-historical. How then, can *Nabda* be perceived as a philological project when the very category of meaning was what was being interrogated? Words do not have a memory as such; words are only possible in a system of differences that is relational and demands conceptualization regardless of the place of articulation. Must we continue to assume that the modern subject of enunciation is unitary? Philology cannot be the grounds of intellectual history, even if it does arise as a direct result of scientific modernity.

The interrogation of freedom proposed by Hanssen and Weiss also leaves much to be desired: although they refer to Laroui’s pitting of freedom against liberalism (26) they do not succeed in specifying what an anti-liberal notion of freedom actually means. For them, freedom is divided into conventional liberal spheres: the question of gender; freedom of speech against state repression; and freedom for Palestine in the Arab nationalist understanding. The concept of freedom is then connected to a notion of time; an Arab time generated from *Nabda* as “purpose-consciousness” that creates a genealogy of knowledge. Despite their avowed skepticism towards post-structuralism, which is characteristic of other

last public lecture he gave which is also included in the volume, entitled “On the Non-existence of an Islamic Mode of Production.”

²⁵ See: Fredric Jameson, *The Prison House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

postcolonial analyses, the insistence on the situated, the particular, and the embedded is asserted throughout the volume. The risk of over-contextualization, however, is the flip side of post-structural de-differentiation. As Hallward puts it, “that everything exists as specific to a situation does not mean its significance is exhausted by that occasion.”²⁶ The mere insistence on particularity, a form of historicism that has been subjected to vehement critique from Levi Strauss to Hayden White, is always prone to an infinite division and a consequent incoherence, “the specific must be distinguished from the specified”: a relation has to be established. It is also important to affirm the specific over the specified, without construing it as singular,²⁷ but this task can only be engaged with via historical materialism, whose resources would be of great benefit to intellectual history, but which Hanssen and Weiss ignore to the volume’s detriment. The specific *cannot* be justified without recourse to the universal: Arabic thought cannot simply be celebrated as singular phenomenon, as McArabia is for the global McDonalds.

Historical thinking in its modern sense is premised upon an ideal of freedom that must hold the past accountable by asking: what should we retain from it? Freedom from what, for what, and with whom, cannot be reduced to the idea of freedom as it has been posited by those that came before. Must modernity’s non-liberal radicality be thrown out with the bathwater of colonization? In the face of the Janus-faced *Nabda* of culturalism and liberalism as presented by Hanssen and Weiss, we cannot but be reminded of Marx’s statement in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*: “the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”

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²⁶ Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial*, 39.

²⁷ Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial*, 48.

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Citation Information

Bou Ali, Nadia, Review of *Arabic Thought Beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda*, *SCTIW Review*, September 12, 2017. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1514>.

ISSN: 2374-9288