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ARTICLE

Authenticity and its Discontents: Abdallah Laroui on the Moroccan and Arab Subject

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This article examines the topic of postcolonial subject formation in the work of Moroccan historian and theorist Abdallah Laroui (1933–) by analyzing his evaluation of the notion of authenticity. I trace understandings of self-identity for Moroccans and other Arab populations that Laroui articulates in his work from the 1960s through the 2000s, and situate his interventions in relation both to relevant political developments and to contributions of other Arab intellectuals on this question, across this time period. Rather than interpret Laroui as a proponent of undifferentiated universalism in his reading of modern history, as many of his critics and commentators do, I demonstrate how he departs from such an approach by calling attention to the notion of particularism, which he defends as a counterpoint to authenticity. The article concludes with a discussion of Laroui's abandonment of a positive, alternative conception of cultural and political subjectivity by the late twentieth century, and considers what the implications of this shift in his thought are.

Introduction

Intellectual history and related fields have witnessed increasing interest of late in post-World War II Arab nationalist and leftist thinking.[1] Among the preoccupations within

[1]Fadi A. Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation* (Durham, NC, 2020), 5–11; Yoav Di-Capua, "The Slow Revolution: May 1968 and the Arab World," *American Historical Review* 123/3 (2018), 733–8, at 734–7; Jens Hanssen, "Crisis and Critique: The Transformation of the Arab Radical Tradition between the 1960s and the 1980s," in Laure Guirguis, ed., *The Arab Lefts: Histories and Legacies, 1950s–1970s* (Edinburgh, 2020), 222–42, at 223–5; Idriss Jebari, "The Rise and Fall of the Arab Left," in Francesco Cavatorta, Lise Storm, and Valeria Resta, eds., *Routledge Handbook on Political Parties in the Middle East and North Africa* (London, 2020), 17–32, at 20–24; Toby Matthiesen, "Red Arabia: Anti-colonialism, the Cold War, and the Long Sixties in the Gulf States," in Chen Jian, Martin Klimke, Masha Kirasirova, Mary Nolan, Marilyn Young and Joanna Waley-Cohen, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation-Building* (London, 2018), 94–105, at 94–6; Samah Selim, "Translator's Introduction," in Arwa Salih, *The Stillborn: Notebooks of a Woman from the Student-Movement Generation in Egypt* (London, 2018), vii–xxvii, at xv–xvii; Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965–1976* (Oxford, 2013), 2–4, 7–9. All translations from original Arabic or French texts are mine unless otherwise noted.

such scholarship has been the question of how Arab intellectuals rethought their self-identity against the backdrop of the decolonizing trends of the times.[2] Alongside their counterparts in other regions of the global South, these thinkers were concerned with how to configure a form of subjectivity that was liberated from the degrading narratives of the modern colonial era, and was attentive to the lingering psychological and physical harms of that time, while not simply constituted by precolonial customs and social practices.

The propensity to essentialize Arab–Islamic history with which the modern European colonial project of territorial conquest and commercial expansion was bound up was clearly something for intellectuals from the region to challenge and repudiate. This did not prevent them from mounting critiques of their own societies—not entirely uninfluenced by European colonial representations or Enlightenment discourses.[3] Despotic governance, social and political inequality, and traditionalistic habits of thinking were all subjected to questioning and judgment. In articulating these visions, Arab intellectuals revived the spirit, if not also the substance, of the late eighteenth- to early twentieth-century movement for cultural, legal, religious, and educational reform known as the *nahda*.[4]

Yet thinkers of the post-World War II years were not content to simply rehash the contributions of earlier generations. A changed historical context compelled a drive toward novelty. Independence under the auspices of continued foreign control across political and economic life called for conceptions of freedom that differed from those on offer during the age of formal colonial domination that overlapped with the *nahda*.[5] For Arab intellectuals, demands for freedom almost inevitably also encompassed knowledge production and cultural identity. The perceived inability of *nahda* thinkers to adequately distance themselves from and pass judgment on schemes of thought handed down from the past also motivated this generation to forward precisely such visions.[6]

In this article I examine the thought of a figure loosely affiliated with, and a critic of, these intellectual trends: Moroccan historian and theorist Abdallah Laroui (1933–). He first achieved widespread acclaim with the 1967 release of *L'idéologie arabe contemporaine* (Contemporary Arab Ideology) (hereafter *L'idéologie*), his broadside against the shortcomings of different discourses within modern and contemporary Arab thought.

[2]Ahmad Agbaria, "Cultural Decolonization: On the Rise of the Margins in Arab Thought," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 43/1 (2023), 83–93, at 83–4; Yoav Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization* (Chicago, 2018), 9–10; Omnia El Shakry, *The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt* (Princeton, 2017), 1–2, 4–5; Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 2010), 11–12.

[3]Manfred Sing, "Arab Self-Criticism after 1967 Revisited: The Normative Turn in Marxist Thought and Its Heuristic Fallacies," *Arab Studies Journal* 25/2 (2017), 144–90, at 146–9.

[4]Abdelilah Belkeziz, *Min al-Nahḍa ilá al-Ḥadātha* (Beirut, 2009), 39; Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, "Language, Mind, Freedom, and Time: The Modern Arab Intellectual Tradition in Four Words," in Hanssen and Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge, 2016), 1–37, at 1; Fawwaz Traboulsi, "Ahmad Faris Al-Shidyaq (1804–87): The Quest for Another Modernity," in ibid., 175–86, at 178–80.

[5]Belkeziz, *Min al-Nahḍa ilá al-Ḥadātha*, 36.

[6]Mohammed 'Abid al-Jabiri, *Khiṭāb 'Arabī Al-Mu'āṣir: Dirāsa Taḥlīlīya Naqdīya* (Beirut, 1994), 23–4.

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In that text as well as in subsequent works, Laroui became associated with a narrow-minded response to the question of how to fashion a new form of subjectivity during the postcolonial era. He was, and has been, interpreted as an unflinching advocate of Western liberalism, who argued for transcending local inheritances in favor of a common path of historical development and universally shared political values.

I question this reading of Laroui's stance in relation to discussions about postcolonial identity formation by dwelling on the often overlooked distinction that he draws between authenticity and particularity.[7] My contention is that through his defense of the latter, he argues for a position beyond bland universalism on the one hand and chauvinism on the other, which combines different sources of knowledge and culture in order to forge a distinct form of subjectivity in future decades.

I elaborate this argument below by first situating Laroui's reflections on subjectivity alongside other accounts of postcolonial identity formation. I then discuss his intellectual development in the 1950s and 1960s, and outline key features of his thought against the backdrop of developments in Moroccan and Arab history. Subsequent sections of this article explicate his interpretations of authenticity as well as the notion of particularity that he develops in contrast. Finally, I show that by the 1990s Laroui had abandoned his concern with particularism as a counterweight to a nostalgic embrace of the Arab–Islamic past, and speculate as to why; relatedly, I point out the potential reasons behind, as well as the shortcomings of, this turn in his thought.

Forming the postcolonial subject

Debates about the need to reconstitute subjectivity in light of modern colonial domination have by no means been limited to Arab intellectual discourses. Numerous thinkers from the global South, as well as scholars commenting on developments across this broad region, have called attention to the changes wrought by the emergence of novel political institutions as well as modes of economic reproduction and knowledge. Of particular concern for observers have been the injustices and traumas that these transformations, and the forms of coercion associated with and embedded within them, have introduced. Byron Good *et al.* accordingly refer to the "disorders" that shape subjectivity in postcolonial China, India, Congo, and beyond, which involve "attention to hierarchy, violence, and subtle modes of internalized anxieties."[8] Such sufferings hardly result in a unitary condition with unvarying moral codes or interpersonal relations.[9]

[7]Other commentators have noted this distinction in Laroui's work, but only briefly. They do not examine why he introduces it, nor what the significance of it to his thought generally is. I offer precisely such an analysis below. For these passing references to the distinction between authenticity and particularity in his work see ʿAbd al-Salam Ben ʿAbd al-ʿAli, *Al-Taʾrīkhānīya wa al-Taḥdīth: Dirāsāt fī Aʿmāl lil-Abdallah Laroui* (Casablanca, 2010), 8; Youssef M. Choueiri, *Arab History and the Nation-State: A Study in Modern Arab Historiography 1820–1980* (London, 1989), 184; Youness Razin, "Abdallah Laroui: Al-Ḥadātha Ufuqan," *Al-Nahḍa* 12 (2016), 3–17, at 5.

[8]Byron J. Good, Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Sandra Teresa Hyde, and Sarah Pinto, "Postcolonial Disorders: Reflections on Subjectivity in the Contemporary World," in Good, Good, Hyde, and Pinto eds., *Postcolonial Disorders* (Berkeley, 2008), 1–40, at 2–3.

[9]Richard Werbner, "Postcolonial Subjectivities: The Personal, the Political and the Moral," in Werbner, ed., *Postcolonial Subjectivities in Africa* (London, 2002), 1–21, at 1–2.

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Yet what is generally shared amongst thinkers reflecting on the topic is a desire to re-create the postcolonial subject anew while taking into account the lingering effects of these ordeals.[10]

Different figures illustrate what such new subjectivities entail. Edward Kamau Braithwaite and Édouard Glissant, for instance, stress the idea of creolization in the Caribbean in order to describe the transformations occasioned in Martinique, Barbados, and elsewhere by European empire and the transatlantic slave trade. It also serves for them as a way to defend future cultural intermixing.[11] For these thinkers, strategies of survival developed in response to forced migration and coercive conditions of labor create the possibility for African, indigenous, and European cultural elements to blend into sustainable life-forms after the catastrophes of enslavement and the large-scale elimination of Caribs and Arawaks.[12]

Léopold Senghor makes a similar argument regarding knowledge production in Senegal and other regions of Africa that were subjected to French colonial dominion. He calls for the establishment of "African humanities" after emancipation. According to him, this field should not rely solely on either French or African vernacular linguistic/epistemological tools; rather, it should combine these sources into a composite whole in postindependence educational institutions.[13]

In the context of post-World War I India, Rabindranath Tagore also argues in favor of borrowing from certain elements of modern European culture. He writes prior to formal decolonization, but he projects a form of subjectivity meant to be relevant to independent India. Tagore upbraids Britain for not delivering on the promise of rights to self-determination, and for degrading human relations by introducing an excessive focus on technology and other material goods.[14] At the same time, he praises Enlightenment traditions for offering the country the opportunity to develop its own conceptions of freedom, and to forge a sense of nationhood that provides unity while preserving difference.[15]

Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman discuss the "crisis of the subject" in postcolonial Africa, and Cameroon in particular.[16] The crisis that they refer to is not a discrete episode or challenge, such as an economic depression, which is amenable to a targeted plan of reform, but a broad impasse in everyday existence. Cameroonians are forced to endure, and regularly improvise responses to, systematic problems in daily life such as an abandoned and eroding physical environment, sparse access to basic infrastructure, and a state that functions by routinely plundering wealth and resources.[17]

[10]David Haekwon Kim, "Mariátegui's East–South Decolonial Experiment," *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 7/2 (2015), 157–79, at 160.

[11]Kris F. Sealey, *Creolizing the Nation* (Evanston, 2020), 79.

[12]Edward Kamau Braithwaite, "Caribbean Man in Space and Time (1975)," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 25/3 (2021), 90–104, at 94–7; Édouard Glissant, "Creolization in the Making of the Americas," *Caribbean Quarterly* 54/1–2 (2008), 81–9, at 82–3.

[13]Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, trans. John Reed and Clive Wake (Nairobi, 1965), 53–5.

[14]Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (1918) (New Delhi, 2015), 16–17, 31–2.

[15]Ibid., 14–16, 73–5.

[16]Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis," *Public Culture* 7/2 (1995), 323–52, at 323–4.

[17]Ibid., 326–35.

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Responses to these conditions for Mbembe and Roitman fluctuate between opposition and acquiescence.[18] At a deep level, however, the subject becomes thoroughly inhibited by perpetual crises and molded by "a prolonged state of anxiety and perplexity."[19]

Algerians after independence in 1962 also experience fundamentally strained subjectivities, according to Karima Lazali, but for different reasons. Whether through direct experience of, or indirect exposure to, the brutalities that characterized French rule, the "subjectivities" of Algerians, she argues, "are … entirely suffused with coloniality."[20] Lazali turns to psychoanalysis as a tool with which to reveal the largely unspoken traumas that persist from this period. These are exacerbated by oppressive postcolonial state authorities who refuse to fully account for the damages inflicted prior to or during their rule, as well as internecine violence in the country, which assumed an extraordinary form during the "Internal War" of the 1990s. The result is a general sense of fear and inertia that is created for the population.[21]

In her recent study *Knot of the Soul*, Stefania Pandolfo also adopts a psychoanalytic approach in exploring subjectivity in contemporary Morocco. She combines this method with a focus on what Islamic traditions refer to as "maladies of the soul" in an ethnographic study of mental illness in the country.[22] Pandolfo relates the individual sufferings of patients, and the diagnoses prescribed by healers with whom she interacts, to broad problems in Moroccan society, such as the economic injustices that compel mass irregular migration across the Mediterranean.[23] In this way, the study of supposed limit conditions of mental illness that she examines serve as lenses through which to make sense of systematic hardships in Morocco writ large.

Laroui relates to these accounts by sharing a concern with other thinkers and scholars over the harms of the colonial period, and how postcolonial leaders only inadequately achieve the objectives of independence through their shortsighted nation-building strategies. He also holds in common with others a yearning to devise a mode of identity that thoughtfully engages with the philosophical legacies of the Enlightenment. His own formulation of Moroccan and Arab subjectivity is shaped by the independence struggles of the mid-twentieth century, and the intellectual trends in the Arab world that proliferate at the time.

The defects of postcolonial projects: Nasser and beyond

Laroui was born and raised in Azemmour, a small town on Morocco's Atlantic coast just south of Casablanca. He is descended from a family that served the *makhzen*, the administrative structure of power surrounding the Moroccan monarchy.[24] For his

[18]Ibid., 348.

[19]Ibid., 351.

[20]Karima Lazali, *Colonial Trauma: A Study of the Psychic and Political Consequences of Colonial Oppression in Algeria*, trans. Matthew B. Smith (Cambridge, 2021), 6.

[21]Ibid., 9–10, 15, 81–2.

[22]Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (Chicago, 2018), 2–3.

[23]Ibid., 8, 28.

[24]Abdallah Laroui and Nancy Gallagher, "Interview: The Life and Times of Abdallah Laroui, a Moroccan Intellectual," *Journal of North African Studies* 3/1 (1998), 132–51, at 132–3.

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secondary and tertiary studies, Laroui moved to Casablanca and Rabat, and then eventually to Paris, and developed a focus on history and the social sciences.[25] He went on to complete his dissertation on the foundations of Moroccan nationalism at the Collège de France.[26] Following brief stints teaching history at the University of California, Los Angeles, and UC Berkeley between 1967 and 1970, Laroui returned to the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences at Mohammed V University in Rabat, where he taught during the mid-1960s. He was briefly removed from his position in 1970 by state authorities, following the translation of *L'idéologie* into Arabic and the perceived influence that it had on Morocco's student movement.[27] He was allowed to return shortly thereafter, and remained in his position until retirement in the year 2000.[28]

From his studies of the history of Morocco and North Africa, to his work on concepts, and examinations of the heritage of Islam known as *turath*, much of Laroui's thought has centered on the issue of modernity and how it has been (mis)understood within Arab intellectual production. Alongside his defense of modernization within Arab societies, this has entailed consistently stressing the need to recognize precisely how the modern era is distinct in order not to assume that preexisting norms and beliefs can be unproblematically grafted onto it.[29] This stance relates to another major element of Laroui's thinking. With inspiration from his primary scholarly training and the crises of his generation, he has long called for the adoption of a historical method when considering social and political problems.[30] For him, disembodied thought leads to faulty descriptive work and to analyses that generally have an air of unreality. At a deeper level, it prevents the discernment of causal patterns across the past as well as an ability to reform the status quo as a consequence of such knowledge.[31]

Independence from French and Spanish rule in Morocco in 1956, and from European empire across the Arab Middle East and North Africa at around the same time, directly shaped these positions as well as Laroui's earliest scholarly interventions from the late 1960s to the early 1980s.[32] From the beginning of decolonization he turned a critical glance inward. In the North African context, he was sympathetic to a trend of scholarship that sought to "decolonize history" by countering reductive French representations of the geography and populations of the region. Yet he worried that simply supplanting a nationalist historiography for a colonial one would risk distracting attention from necessary internal reforms postindependence.[33]

This same concern extended broadly across the region. Laroui was skeptical of intellectual paradigms and nation-building schemes across Arab-majority regions of the

[25] Abdelmajid Kaddouri, *Abdallah Laroui: Le penseur marocain contemporaine* (Casablanca, 2019), 16–17.

[26] Laroui and Gallagher, "Interview," 140–41.

[27] Abdallah Laroui, *Khawāṭir al-Ṣabāḥ: Yawmīyāt 1967–1973* (2001) (Casablanca, 2007), 66, 100.

[28] Kaddouri, *Abdallah Laroui*, 22.

[29] Hassan Bayqi, "Mafhūm al-Ḥadātha fī Fikr Abdallah Laroui," *Al-Azmina al-Ḥadītha* 8 (2014), 70–84, at 71.

[30] Abdelilah Belkeziz, *Naqd al-Turāth* (Beirut, 2014), 409–12.

[31] 'Abd al-Majid al-Qadduri, "Abdallah Laroui Mu'arrikh al-Bāṭin," in *Hakadha Takallum Abdallah Laroui* (Beirut, 2015), 189–202, at 201–2.

[32] Khadija Sabbar, *Al-Ḥadātha fī al-Mashrū' al-Fikrī li-Abdallah Laroui* (Casablanca, 2017), 7.

[33] Abdallah Laroui, "Décoloniser l'histoire," *Hespéris* 6 (1965), 239–42, at 241.

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Middle East and North Africa that focused on liberation from colonial domination at the expense of a complementary concern with local beliefs and habits. This is because he thought that the latter required fundamental transformation. Laroui's principal concern is what he, alongside others,[34] terms the problem of "delay" or "backwardness" (Fr. *retard*, Ar. *takhalluf/ta'akhur*): the tendency for modern development to occur in certain domains but not others, and, as a result of this disconnect, for modern existence in the Arab world to be experienced as fundamentally flawed and incomplete.

Due to the fact that "radical" or "revolutionary" regimes and parties were ascendant at the time, and captured the devotion of many intellectuals, Laroui dedicates special attention to how they illustrate this problem. Amongst these political forces, he was mainly concerned with Egypt under President Gamal Abdel Nasser (r. 1956–70). Laroui observed the results of Nasser's political endeavors up close during a stint that he spent as cultural attaché to the Moroccan embassy in Cairo in the early 1960s.[35] His time there coincided with the dissolution of the attempt at Arab political unity between Egypt and Syria known as the United Arab Republic (1958–61), which to him was an indication of basic deficiencies within Nasser's approach to governance and nation building.[36]

For Laroui, Nasser and the Free Officers epitomized the problem of a disconnect in establishing change because they were overly concerned with the material dimensions of modernization, such as industrialization and technological development. The epistemological bases and educational training that such advances demanded, as well as other imperatives such as rational and independent thought, and political freedom, were either neglected or outright stifled by Egypt's rulers.[37] Absent requisite development on this nonmaterial level, which Laroui labeled the "cultural,"[38] efforts at material progress would be incomplete, and Nasser's ostensibly revolutionary project was bound to falter. The Egyptian leader's anti-imperial rhetoric, and strident declarations of support for Arab unity and the cause of Palestinian independence, only served to mask the weaknesses of this system to Laroui, and to leave nonrational patterns of thinking and top-down practices of rule unchanged.[39]

[34]Sadiq Jalal al-'Azm, *Al-Naqd al-Dhātī ba'da al-Hazīma* (Beirut, 1968), 77; Hichem Djaït, *Europe and Islam* (1978), trans. Peter Heinegg (Berkeley, 1985), 172–3; Constantin Zurayq, *Ma'nat al-Nakba Mujaddadan* (Beirut, 1967), 34, 41.

[35]Laroui and Gallagher, "Interview," 136.

[36]The union collapsed as a result of Syria being forced into a position of junior partner both politically and economically, as well as because of the repressive political environment and divisions amongst leftist trends that Nasser helped to foster in the two countries. See, on this point, Hanna Batatu, "Some Reflections on the Decline of the Arab Left and of Iraq's Communists," *CCAS Reports*, 1983, 1–8, at 4; Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton, 2003), 226–7; Fawaz A. Gerges, *Making the Arab World: Nasser, Qutb, and the Clash That Shaped the Middle East* (Princeton, 2018), 195; Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Arab Left* (Syracuse, 1976), 26.

[37]Abdallah Laroui, "Histoire, science, idéologie," in Abdallah Bensmaïn, *Symbole et idéologie: Entretiens avec Roland Barthes, Abdallah Laroui, Jean Molino* (Rabat, 1987), 31–75, at 64.

[38]Abdallah Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual: Traditionalism or Historicism?*, trans. Diarmid Campbell (Berkeley, 1976), 9.

[39]Laroui, *Khawāṭir al-Ṣabāḥ: Yawmīyāt 1967–1973*, 9

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At the heart of Laroui's examination of how Arab nationalist and leftist political trends fail to adequately implement modernization strategies are his conceptions of rationalization and liberalization. His commitment to both begs the question of how he defines them. By rationalization he means forms of thinking and acting that do not rely on supernatural sources for justification, but rather on the practical effects that they produce, which can be empirically observed, and logically demonstrated.[40] He insists on understanding rationalization as realized through historical development, rather than abstractly.[41] This is because, as Laroui details in his later seminal study on the topic, rationality understood as a faculty of the individual mind can be consistent with collective practices that are nonrational, and thus not bring about the type of societal change that he envisions.[42] For this reason, he stresses the development of rationality across time through, for instance, the evolution of commerce and modes of labor, relations between rulers and ruled, and the conduct of war and diplomacy, all of which turn rational action into a habitual practice.[43]

Liberalization is also understood historically for him, in two senses. On the one hand it can be traced back to efforts in Europe in the eighteenth century to challenge claims of inherited authority and fixed social status. Liberals, to him, are defined by their questioning of these supposed givens, and they stand correspondingly for a belief in equal rights to live, think, work, and participate in public life freely.[44] On the other hand, liberalization is a historical phase that must be passed through.

To frame things this way is not to dictate the shape of future development. Put differently, his stance does not translate into a normative commitment to liberalism. Indeed he takes umbrage with being labeled an "Arab liberal."[45] Nevertheless, traversing the historical phase of liberalism is not a passive process for him. In Mohammed Sabila's words, liberalism for Laroui stands for "the embodiment of modernity, culturally and intellectually."[46] He thus argues that it needs to be actively imbibed in order for its goods to be properly assimilated,[47] even while he remains open to its eventual transcendence.

This view is explained by what is arguably the core feature of Laroui's thought: historicism. Following other thinkers associated with this method, such as Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood,[48] he considers values, practices of societal reproduction, and forms of thinking to be historically conditioned, and thus variable. Among other reasons, he turns to historicism in order to respond to the condition that he

[40]Mohammed Sabila, "Naẓarīyat al-Ḥadātha wa al-Taḥdīth fī Fikr Abdallah Laroui," in Mohammed Al-Dahi, ed., *Al-Naghma al-Muwākiba: Qirā'āt fī A'māl Abdallah Laroui* (Casablanca, 2015), 124–32, at 128.

[41]Mohammed Shaykh, *Mas'alat al-Ḥadātha fī al-Fikr al-Maghribī al-Mu'āṣir* (Rabat, 2004), 32–4.

[42]Abdallah Laroui, *Mafhūm al-'Aql: Maqāla fī al-Mufāraqāt* (1996) (Casablanca, 2012), 65–6.

[43]Abdallah Laroui, *Mafhūm al-Dawla* (1981) (Casablanca, 2014), 88–91, 103.

[44]Mohammed Sabila, *Fī Taḥawwulāt al-Mujtama' al-Maghribī* (Casablanca, 2010), 119.

[45]Abdallah Laroui, "'An al-Taqlīd wa al-Takhalluf al-Ta'rīkhī: Abdallah Laroui, Abdelaziz Belal, Mohammed Guessous" (1974), trans. Mohammed Bulaysh and Mustafa Misnawi, *Bayt al-Ḥikma* 1/1 (1986), 137–68, at 138.

[46]Sabila, *Fī Taḥawwulāt al-Mujtama' al-Maghribī*, 121.

[47]Mohammed Noureddine Affaya, *Al-Nahḍa al-Mu'alaqqa* (Casablanca, 2020), 72.

[48]Abdallah Laroui, *Mafhūm al-Ta'rīkh: Al-Juz' al-Awwal: al-Ālfāẓ wa al-Madhāhib* (1992) (Beirut, 2012), 34.

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terms "backwardness." In order for Arab societies to overcome deficiencies in the prosecution of warfare or in industrialization, they must first, according to him, adopt the rationalizing and liberalizing changes that other societies beginning in the West have introduced.[49] Part of the problem with Laroui's conception is that he misleadingly suggests that these transformations occur in the West and then spread outwards, overlooking the shared processes of work, resource extraction, and political contestation through which these key features of modernization were realized. The main takeaway for him of this historicist approach is nonetheless to consider rationalization and liberalization not as ends in and of themselves, but as historical exigencies that will inevitably give way to a yet-to-be-determined future.

While Nasser's project was to Laroui emblematic of an inability to grasp these historical lessons, it did not exhaust this orientation. The problem was more widespread. Laroui accordingly argues that the preoccupation with developing technological and industrial capacities while neglecting the cultural underpinnings of these processes can be observed throughout the Arab world, even amongst those critical of or opposed to Nasser's leadership.[50] Laroui focuses in his early work on how these political trends interact with and enjoy succor from Arab intellectuals. These figures to him promote discourses that rely on an imagined past of ingenuity and glorious achievement, and by doing so (even if inadvertently), neglect the historical lessons that Laroui counsels attention toward.

Authenticity in thought and practice

Laroui develops this evaluation of Arab intellectual culture most extensively in *L'idéologie*. The book was published just prior to the June 1967 War, in which Egypt, Jordan, and Syria suffered a quick military rout at the hands of Israel that became known in Arabic as the *naksa* or "setback."[51] Israel occupied the Sinai peninsula, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights in the wake of the war,[52] and the military defeat was considered by many to signal the ultimate demise of Nasser's political project.[53] Laroui's composition and publication of the text prior to the *naksa* showed that he, alongside others,[54] had nontrivial misgivings about that project beforehand. Even more importantly, his concern transcended Nasser's policies, encompassing as it did intellectual trends across the political spectrum in different Arab countries.

Laroui begins *L'idéologie* by referencing a "problematic" that has preoccupied Moroccan and Arab intellectuals since the *nahda* of how to relate to the modern world in light of what he terms "backwardness." The primary dimension of this problematic is

[49]Laroui, "An al-Taqlīd," 156.

[50]Abdallah Laroui, "Ishkālīya Jadīda li-Wāqi' 'Arabī Jadīd," *Mawāqif* 30/31 (1975), 17–21, at 17.

[51]Omnia El Shakry, "Rethinking Arab Intellectual History: Epistemology, Historicism, Secularism," *Modern Intellectual History* 18/2 (2021), 547–72, at 561.

[52]Guy Laron, *The Six-Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East* (New Haven, 2017), 1.

[53]Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton, 2003), 254.

[54]Sune Haugbolle, "The New Arab Left and 1967," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44/4 (2017), 497–512, at 499.

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that of subjectivity.[55] Any effort to comprehend and fashion one's identity for Moroccan (and more generally Arab) thinkers is bound to be mediated by engagement with Western intellectual culture, inclusive of its discourses and achievements in philosophy, science, technology, and art. The concepts and modes of expression that to Laroui the West has introduced suffuse modern life to the point of being unavoidable.[56]

Yet Moroccan and Arab intellectuals have a tortured relationship to their reliance on things Western. This feeling stems from a belief that acknowledgment of dependence on the outside would be tantamount to admitting not just economic and political impotence, but, in addition, the loss of the historical and cultural traits that make Arab subjectivity distinct. Laroui concedes that this problematic is a shared one across decolonizing societies. He submits nonetheless that the richness of past Arab–Islamic culture makes efforts to cling to it starker within the Middle East and North Africa, and argues that this reaction heightens the tensions within themselves that Arab intellectuals sense.[57]

Laroui sketches three ideal types of intellectual in the region that to him have captured how thinkers respond to his "problematic" since the *nahda*.[58] The *shaykh*, or Muslim cleric, understands relations between Muslim-majority societies and Europe as one of perennial conflict between Islam and Christianity. He understands the economic and technological dominance of Western regions at the moment to be the result of weakened piety amongst Muslims, and calls for a return to a "true" form of the faith as the only way to rectify this situation.[59] The liberal politician also sees nothing fundamental about Islam in explaining discrepancies between Arab and Western societies. The main problem for this figure is the despotism of the Ottoman Empire, and he advocates the adoption of parliamentary institutions and liberal values in order to combat its legacies and achieve parity with Europe, but without properly grasping the theoretical and historical roots of liberalism.[60] Finally, the technophile sets aside discussions of politics and religion, and posits that the key to reversing discrepancies in power and knowledge production experienced in the Arab region is to emulate science and technology pioneered in the global North.[61]

By the time of the immediate postcolonial years during the 1950s and 1960s, Laroui holds that none of the positions represented by these figures have proven effective in addressing fundamental divides between the Arab world and Europe. What is more, the thinkers who can be arrayed across these disparate positions are intellectually confused.[62] This confusion manifests itself in two penchants that cut across his ideal types.

[55] Abdallah Laroui, *L'idéologie arabe contemporaine: Essai critique* (Paris, 1967), 3–4.

[56] Ibid., 3.

[57] Ibid., 4.

[58] Laroui remarks that he prefers this approach because through it he is able to capture a wide range of figures, as well as the diverse historical records that they leave behind, as opposed to focusing on single personalities. Ibid., 28.

[59] Ibid., 19–22.

[60] Ibid., 23–5.

[61] Ibid., 25–7.

[62] Ibid., 66.

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Intellectuals borrow at will from liberalism, nationalism, socialism, and/or Islamic doctrines. They fail to grasp any of these traditions in a theoretically sound or historically informed manner, and, in synthesizing premodern and modern sources of knowledge, they diminish the fundamental changes that the latter presuppose.[63] The crisis of self-identity during the postcolonial phase, as well as a lack of in-depth knowledge of genealogies of political thought, engenders this eclectic impulse.

Thinkers also, according to his analysis, adopt a position of defiance against Europe, and Western civilization generally. In the name of a "right to be contrary,"[64] they repudiate European thought as tainted by an association with empire and affirm local customs and beliefs as alternative bases of identity. This entails excessive esteem for the Arab–Islamic past. In the face of continued domination at the hands of Europe and, increasingly, the US in political, military, and economic affairs, and out of a desire to redeem a heritage that had been subjected to crude renderings by colonial powers, they turn to this history as a source of solace and ultimately renewal. Advocates of this style of thinking cherish a static model of the past that does not attend to diachronic change, nor allow for the transformed senses of self-identity and expression that would logically follow from openness to historical evolution. Laroui understands this approach under the heading of authenticity (Fr. *authenticité*, Ar. *aṣāla*).

Arab proponents of authenticity did not uniformly succumb to the tendencies that Laroui ascribes to this trend. Scholars have demonstrated that numerous authors who staked claims to authenticity from the 1950s to the 1970s drew from modern European discourses such as existentialism and Marxism, and rethought the tenets and goals of these discourses and others in light of local conditions and popular demands.[65] As Yoav Di-Capua shows, thinkers such as ʿAbd al-Rahman Badawi (1917–2002) and Husayn Muruwwa (1910–87) also engaged judiciously with the legacies of their own cultural heritage, and did not merely call for unthinking emulation of the past.[66] Moreover, during intellectual conferences organized by the Arab League and local universities in Cairo and Kuwait from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s, authenticity and related topics, such as renewal and modernity, were taken up and debated. Issa Boullata and Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab observe that in these venues as well, thinkers including Shaker Mustafa (1921–97) and Zaki Najib Mahmud (1905–93) forwarded non-essentialized conceptions of authenticity, where Arab culture was portrayed as open, and adaptable to outside influences.[67]

In light of these complexities that he overlooks, it would be plausible to understand the filiopietistic leanings that Laroui identifies with this discourse as characterizing but

[63] Ibid., 66–7.

[64] This is a phrase that he adds to his later Arabic translation of the text. Abdallah Laroui, *Al-Īdyūlūjīyā al-ʿArabīya al-Muʿāṣira* (1995) (Beirut, 2011), 78.

[65] Ahmad Agbaria, "Dār al-Talīʾah and the Question of Arab Authenticity in the 1960s," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 52/1–2 (2021), 228–53, at 228–9; Di-Capua, *No Exit*, 9–10; Armando Salvatore, "The Rational Authentication of Turāth in Contemporary Arab Thought: Muḥammad al-Jābirī and Ḥasan Ḥanafī," *Muslim World*, 85/3–4 (1995), 191–214, at 193–4.

[66] Di-Capua, *No Exit*, 48–50; Yoav Di-Capua, "Homeward Bound: Ḥusayn Muruwwah's Integrative Quest for Authenticity," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 44/1 (2013), 21–52, at 32, 46.

[67] Issa J. Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought* (Albany, 1990), 13–14; Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 116–23.

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one trend amongst its partisans. He may argue reductively when casting impulses in such a direction as if they comprise all forms of authenticity. If this is the case, however, it could be argued that it is because he understands the urge to unthinkingly cherish one's culture and past to be an abiding potential that continually haunts expressions of it. He highlights the dangers of chauvinism and an infatuation with imagined origins in order to avoid these propensities. This representation of authenticity also lends itself to a sharper distinction with the different view that he defends.

Before explaining Laroui's alternative to authenticity it would be instructive to consider the arguments of his critics on this question, and what other positions they defend. For both Abdelkebir Khatibi (1938–2009) and Mohammed ʿAbid al-Jabiri (1935–2010), two prominent Moroccan intellectual contemporaries of his, Laroui's thinking is essentially trapped within a European Enlightenment framework, and in particular a liberal one. Khatibi claims that Laroui restates European theories of historicism without adding anything. He calls instead for a fundamental break with Western reason and metaphysics.[68] Al-Jabiri submits that Laroui sets up a false alternative of either accepting liberalism and its goods, or reinforcing what is traditionalistic and outdated within Arab culture. For al-Jabiri, a critique of liberalism does not necessarily entail its rejection, and the Arab–Islamic heritage contains within it valuable resources for political culture in the present, not only burdensome remnants to be discarded.[69]

Many commentators on Laroui's thought come to similar conclusions. Some assert that his principal response to authenticity is an argument in favor of universality, in the sense of the adoption of modern values, habits, and institutions that on his reading have origins in European culture.[70] Others go further and claim that he calls for replicating Western traditions in the Arab world, and forswearing any connections to local inheritances from the past.[71]

It is true that from his early work onwards Laroui has consistently defended modernity in the Arab region.[72] However, he understands basic features that he associates with it—rationality, liberal freedom, the rule of law—to apply generally, as opposed to being culturally or geographically specific. What Laroui's critics also importantly fail to perceive is that he does not imagine historical development in the Arab Middle East and North Africa to be a process of reproducing its basic contours as they are realized elsewhere. He does not, in other words, uphold an undifferentiated model of history as an alternative to the arguments proffered by proponents of authenticity. Rather, in

[68]Abdelkebir Khatibi, "Other-Thought" (1981), in Khatibi, *Plural Maghreb: Writings on Postcolonialism*, trans. P. Burcu Yalim (London, 2019), 1–23, at 1–4, 18.

[69]Mohammed ʿAbid al-Jabiri, *Fī Ghimār al-Siyāsa: Fikran wa Mumārisa – al-Kitāb al-Thānī* (Beirut, 2009), 281.

[70]Driss Habti, "Debating Islam, Tradition, and Modernity in Contemporary Arab–Islamic Thought: Perspectives of Hassan Hanafi and Abdallah Laroui," in Lutfi Sinar, ed., *Debates on Civilization in the Muslim World: Critical Perspectives on Islam and Modernity* (New Delhi, 2017), 285–321, at 305.

[71]Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabiʿ, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual* History (London, 2004), 367; Agbaria, "Cultural Decolonization," 88; ʿAbd al-Majid al-Sughayyir, *Fī al-Badʾ Kānat al-Siyāsa: Ishkālīyat al-Taʾṣīl lil-Nahḍa wa al-Dīmūqrāṭīya fī al-Mujtamaʿ al-Maghribī* (Rabat, 1999), 133–6; Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies* (Chicago, 1988), 381.

[72]Mohammed Noureddine Affaya, "Qawl al-ʿAql," in *Hakadha Takallum Abdallah Laroui*, 7–14, at 7.

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evaluating this discourse, Laroui still aims to retain a sense of distinctiveness to Arab history and culture.

He introduces his alternative conception in *L'idéologie* in the context of explaining what motivates calls for authenticity. For Laroui, the appeal of the latter arises from an understandable desire not to forsake a belief in cultural uniqueness in the face of the seemingly homogenizing changes of modernization.[73] At issue for him, however, is that this desire results in detachment from reality. Present circumstances are misconstrued when an abstract, ahistorical sense of subjectivity is asserted.

In response, Laroui returns to the issue that he begins the text with and argues for recognition of the dominance that modern European concepts, frames of thinking, and institutions have achieved in the Arab world. Yet in a nod to worries about a loss of subjectivity, he asserts that a localized understanding of values and cultural identity is possible under the framework of these generalizing changes. He accordingly identifies a process of overcoming a sense of subjectivity based upon authenticity:

> the ancient self, product of an eradicated society, hangs on for a while, but then it will be replaced by another self, which is the product of a new society; while waiting for the latter to crystallize there will be a void, that is true, yet rather than esteem that void, it is necessary to relativize it by trusting in temporal development.[74]

Problematic, again, is the fact that he does not perceive how modernizing changes are always already shaped by multiple experiences of thought and action.[75] But this endorsement of an alternative sense of subjectivity reveals Laroui's acknowledgment of the anxieties that lie behind the power imbalances structuring recent historical development, and the belief that local characteristics possess cultural value that should be recognized.

Toward the end of the text, he illustrates this understanding of a new subject within a framework of general changes across the world by distinguishing between folklore and literary/artistic expression. The former, according to his interpretation, is connected with selective and static conceptions of Arab–Islamic history. Laroui traces the fascination with it in Morocco to the French Protectorate period, when European and American observers of the country became interested in folklore as an object of study, and a group of Moroccan intellectuals followed suit after 1950. At that time, the latter group treated children's stories, popular poetry, songs from the *Rif* mountain region in the country's northeast, and rituals performed for tourist consumption in the southern city of Marrakech as distinctly Moroccan forms of cultural expression.[76]

Laroui considers styles of interior design in Moroccan homes similarly. The standards and inspiration behind them are introduced externally by European middle

[73]Laroui, *L'idéologie*, 67.

[74]Ibid.

[75]In his Arabic translation of the text, he adds, just after the above passage, that his approach aims to "replace a more positive concept for that of authenticity, namely that of particularity [*khuṣūṣīya*]." Laroui, *Al-Īdyūlūjīyā*, 92.

[76]Laroui, *L'idéologie*, 175.

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classes.[77] In a revision to the original French text, Laroui further comments in his 1995 Arabic translation of *L'idéologie* that after being "foisted upon" Morocco by these classes at the time of the French Protectorate, such styles were then adopted "after independence without the least bit of scrutiny or thought."[78] The rediscovery and veneration of Andalusian music in Morocco after independence likewise is mediated for him by way of outside influences, in particular the views expressed by UNESCO experts.[79]

This conception of folklore and other elements of Moroccan heritage finds support in the analyses of historians and anthropologists who have studied the creation of tradition in the country by French colonial authorities.[80] By appearing to preserve what they represented as abiding features of precolonial social and political life, Hubert Lyautey—resident general of Protectorate Morocco from 1912 to 1925—and other French administrators portrayed their presence in the country in a benign light. They regarded themselves as the caretakers of Moroccan society, ushering in modernization while respecting traditional habits, all the while downplaying the violence of colonial conquest.[81] As analysts have demonstrated, what the appearance of the preservation of tradition also obscures is how relics of the precolonial past, from the Alawite monarchy to the divide between areas of the country ostensibly within and outside state control (*bled al-makhzen* and *bled al-siba*[82]), and methods of design for urban spaces and mosques, were made to seem more integral to Moroccan society than they in fact were. Far from simply preserving tradition, French colonial authorities actively constructed and renewed it. In doing so, they narrowed the complexity of social, aesthetic, and religious inheritances to what they deemed to be authentically Moroccan.[83]

Folklore fits this pattern of strategies with regard to tradition because its appeal is largely a recent construction. The criteria by which it is judged also reflect a view

[77] Ibid., 176.

[78] Laroui, *Al-Īdyūlūjīyā*, 211.

[79] Laroui, *L'idéologie*, 176.

[80] Laroui reiterates a similar interpretation in his later work: "No, they decided and affirmed: this is who the Moroccan is, this is how he was and will remain until he perishes. Thus it is up to Protectorate officials to defend this original culture and to oppose those amongst the Moroccan youth who fight it and call for its removal, especially given that it attracts tourists." Abdallah Laroui, *Istibāna* (Casablanca, 2016), 38-39.

[81] Edmund Burke III, *The Ethnographic State: France and the Invention of Moroccan Islam* (Oakland, 2014), 12.

[82] These terms refer to a divide in Moroccan society between an area of political and administrative control (*bled al-makhzen*) and a domain of disorder that lies outside it (*bled al-siba*). For Edmund Burke III, early French ethnographers such as Edmond Doutté and Eugène Aubin Descos were able to see through this distinction as a faulty European imposition, pointing out that even in allegedly remote parts of the *siba*, there was contact with the *makhzen*, and that relations between the *makhzen* and populations in the *siba* were not marked by "mere anarchy," but instead by a form of order. Burke shows that it was only between 1904 and 1912 that "crisp, simple, dichotomous distinctions" between these domains became taken for granted, because they served the expansionist interests of the French Empire within Moroccan territory at the time. See Burke, "The Image of the Moroccan State in French Ethnological Literature: A New Look at the Origin of Lyautey's Berber Policy," in Ernest Gellner and Charles Micaud, eds., *Arabs and Berbers: From Tribe to Nation in North Africa* (London, 1972), 175–99, at 175, 178–9, 181, 188.

[83] Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven, 1968), 75–8; Jennifer Roberson, "The Changing Face of Morocco under King Hassan II," *Mediterranean Studies* 22/1 (2014), 57–87, at 64–5, 79; Jonathan Wyrtzen, *Making Morocco: Colonial Intervention and the Politics of Identity* (Ithaca, 2015), 15, 23, 79–86.

of Morocco as defined by unchanging customs. Laroui argues that close examination reveals that the colonial reinvigoration of folklore serves particular strata, namely Moroccan intellectuals, the wealthy and middle classes, and outside observers with a limited understanding of Moroccan history, such as Paul Bowles (1910–99), the American writer who relocated to Tangier, a city in the country's far north, in the late 1940s.[84]

What these groups consider to be popular, however, does not find corresponding appeal amongst the segments of the Moroccan population that are represented as the true carriers of it, meaning the urban poor and rural mountain dwellers.[85] The clear evidence of elitism behind the circulation of folklore is hence more revealing of the "psychology of those who enjoy it" than of its "content."[86] It indicates the yearnings of Moroccan intellectuals toward their past, yet has at best a minimal presence in the historical record, and, more importantly, scarcely any popular resonance in the present.

Literary/artistic expression, by contrast, moves beyond the "false dilemma" that Arab intellectuals pose between cultural production as either "nationalist" or "universalist."[87] There is bound, for him, to be reliance on European epistemological frameworks in such work, just as there is on models of socioeconomic development within modernization projects.[88] Yet for Laroui the specific features of Arab societies will inevitably be revealed through forms of expression guided by grounded treatments of social problems.[89] Indeed he ends the text by arguing that dominant Euro-American approaches in the social sciences fail to yield adequate ethnographic knowledge about Arab societies. Arab intellectuals, he exhorts, would be well positioned to provide this type of granular understanding, assuming that they take up the task of candidly analyzing fundamental issues such as underdevelopment.[90] It is in this sense that their intellectual production can assimilate thought from other regions of the world while also providing for novel insights drawn from immersion within their own societies.[91]

Particularity and historicism

Laroui further elaborates his understanding of cultural difference in other works, including his 1973 text *Al-ʿArab wa al-Fikr al-Taʾrīkhī* (Arabs and Historical Thought), where he brings it under the heading of "particularity" (*khuṣūṣīya*). He portrays the notion in that book as a positive recuperation of Arab history:

> What is required of the intellectual today is to raise in the face of the representative of authentic culture, and the institutions, social structures, and behaviors that follow from it, the banner of culture that opens the doors of progress, despite

[84]Laroui, *L'idéologie*, 176.
[85]Ibid., 178.
[86]Ibid., 175.
[87]Ibid., 179.
[88]Ibid., 168.
[89]Yahya Ben El-Oualid, *Abdallah Laroui: al-Muʾarrikh wa al-Naqd al-Thaqāfī* (Casablanca, 2019), 97.
[90]Laroui, *L'idéologie*, 214.
[91]Ibid., 213.

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> the negative consequences that it contains. To cling to a discourse of authenticity out of defiance of the imperialist West means in current circumstances to be blind to reality and to disavow the future, which actually raises the issue of particularity for consideration, but under a new framework, and through new intellectual and material means.[92]

Laroui is sensitive here to the wrongdoings of the colonial era for Arabs, but also intent on defending a forward-looking conception of culture against the abstract and hidebound impulses that he deduces within discourses of authenticity. Important in addition is the fact that he does not associate the rejection of authenticity with an adoption of already existing tools of thought, but instead "new intellectual and material means," showing the novelty that he associates with future subjectivities.

He continues to frame particularity in explicit contrast with authenticity further along in the text:

> It is necessary to distinguish between particularity, which is the construction of a distinct personality inspired by the given conditions of the present, that are also the products of the past and that one cannot deliberately forswear, and authenticity, or remaining bound to a social and behavioral model configured as the origin of our developmental path, which is no longer appropriate to current circumstances, as there is no place in history for what is immutable.[93]

Laroui draws this same contrast in *Al-ʿArab wa al-Fikr al-Taʾrīkhī* by describing particularity as a conception that "recognizes the unity of history and rejects the possibility of permanent allegiance to an original model. The objective of historical analysis is ultimately to separate particularity from authenticity—the first is an evolving movement and the second fossilized immobility, oriented toward the past."[94]

What stands out in these passages is how Laroui understands particularity to be consciously constructed around a specific view of history, which connotes movement and dynamism. Particularity is made flexible and amenable to changing circumstances, in comparison with the distinctly rigid outlooks that he finds within musings on authenticity. Laroui considers modernization "self-evident," only to be denied by those who refuse to face reality. "But," he argues, "the tools of modernization are historically and theoretically numerous, and discussion with regard to them is open."[95] Once again, he stakes out a position beyond a disdainful attitude toward basic social and political changes, and one that would reduce modern development to a uniform set of institutions and values. Historical advancement allows for variation, and attention to this fact can prompt thinking that transcends the dichotomous framework of authenticity versus Westernization that he takes issue with.

He suggests later in his 1981 book *Mafhūm al-Dawla* (The Concept of the State) that political discourses such as nationalism, existentialism, and liberalism are also subject to being "interpreted according to the spatial and temporal demands that are

[92] Abdallah Laroui, *Al-ʿArab wa al-Fikr al-Taʾrīkhī* (1973) (Casablanca, 2014), 22.
[93] Ibid., 43.
[94] Ibid., 62.
[95] Ibid., 15 n. 11.

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particular to Arabs."[96] In these ways, a historicist method, which involves attention to contextual differences across time, can lead to conceptions of politics and culture that are capacious of distinctive approaches to thought, individual and collective identification, and decision making in relation to problems at different scales. To Laroui, this diversity of thinking and acting is all contained within a broadly shared frame of modern experience.

Yet would traditions from the Arab–Islamic past be a part of this diversity? This question lies at the heart of the criticisms leveled against Laroui for his conception of postcolonial Arab subjectivity. As detailed above, some contend that he calls for abandoning distinctive markers of Arab culture when fashioning a new conception of the subject. Would his idea of particularity allow for the retention of past inheritances? In a discussion first published in the Moroccan journal *Lamalif* in 1974, his conversation partner, Moroccan scholar of economic history and development Abdelaziz Belal (1932–82), poses a variant of this question to him. Laroui's response reveals the extent to which he takes issue with framing the heritage of the Arab–Islamic past in this manner.

For one thing, his objection has to do with a belief that warnings of cultural extinction are unfounded. "I don't believe that it is possible in any way," he comments, "for Arabs to forsake their cultural specificity, if they were to further adopt rational ideologies, or to industrialize their countries."[97] He continues in a similar vein slightly later: "We are, of course, different with respect to Western society, and we will always remain different with respect to it, even if we adopt the same path of development. That is something unavoidable."[98] Arab culture, like any other, is a complex construct whose meaning and traits evolve over time. There are no indications to support the concern that it would somehow dissolve or be overwhelmed by processes of development shared with other parts of the world. Such a worry to Laroui is a red herring, and only serves to strengthen conservative forces that promote a fallacious conceit of unchanging tradition.[99]

Whether or not historical inheritances will be retained is also a misleading framework within which to debate the past and future for Laroui because it does not touch on the more important issue of *how* the Arab–Islamic heritage will be engaged. At least when it comes to intellectual work, on the assumption again that its constitutive elements will persist in some form, it is essential, to him, to treat features of the past with contemporary modes of historical analysis in mind. That presupposes the adoption of a "liberal point of view" from which to carry out independent thought, and allow for diverse questions and conclusions.[100] Such an approach also presupposes the treatment of "real-existing history" as a point of departure.[101] These two principles for rigorous intellectual work guard against what Laroui envisions to be the most corrosive tendencies within discourses of authenticity: doctrinaire views of thinkers,

[96]Laroui, *Mafhūm al-Dawla*, 202–3.
[97]Laroui, "'An al-Taqlīd," 141.
[98]Ibid., 163.
[99]Ibid., 141.
[100]Ibid., 142.
[101]Ibid., 147–8.

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concepts, and schools of thought. In such rigid understandings, only certain interpretations are deemed to be warranted, and these topics are treated outside space and time, thus neglecting historical development.

While his thoughts on authenticity, particularity, and related topics in these different works reveal how Laroui imagines a positive relationship toward past inheritances, he is sparing in his elaboration of just what such an approach would look like. In the discussion published in *Lamalif*, he refers to the work of Syrian philosopher Sadiq Jalal al-ʿAzm's (1934–2016) on Platonic love as an example of intellectual production that aligns with his conception.[102] This is so, he claims, because Al-ʿAzm examines a topic that traditionalist thinkers are fond of while employing modern methods of study to examine it.[103]

This leaves open the question of what defines particularity in relation to the histories that Laroui narrates. If he does not fall victim to offering an overly general conception of culture as a response to how modern development takes place, what would distinguish Moroccan, North African, or Arab historical development as distinct or unique?

It is apparent from his remarks that Laroui does not elaborate at length on the details or definition of this new sense of subjectivity. The fact that he does not, I would argue, can be explained by his historicist method. To understand history in a dialectical sense,[104] as he does, leads Laroui to the view that the tension between imperialistic universalism and authenticity will give way in favor of new foundations for subjectivity amongst Moroccans and Arabs. His expectation is that coming phases of history will generate forms of subjectivity that transcend this dichotomy. Yet beyond identifying what the pitfalls underlying this dilemma are and gesturing toward an amalgam between the universal and the particular, Laroui does not articulate the features of this new subject. Its substance is to be shaped by future generations, not prefigured in advance.

The conception of particularity that Laroui develops in these works is noteworthy for several reasons. For one thing, he acknowledges through it the injustices that are the product of European empire in the Arab world without assuming bitter attachment to them. The problem with some theorizations of authenticity for Laroui is that they dwell unduly on such injustices, and thereby prevent the development of positive modes of thinking and acting. By moving beyond strict acrimony toward European traditions while at the same time not losing sight of the persistent influence of colonialism, he avoids such reactionary responses.

Additionally, Laroui carves out a space beyond Enlightenment narratives of progress on the one hand and tradition on the other. His notion of particularity makes clear that there are not only two discrete options for historical development in Morocco and the Middle East–North Africa region more generally. Rather, and contrary to

[102]Sadiq Jalal al-ʿAzm, *Fī al-Ḥubb wa al-Ḥubb al-ʿUdhrī* (Beirut, 1968).

[103]Laroui, "'An al-Taqlīd," 147.

[104]Hosam Aboul-Ela, "The Specificities of Arab Thought: Morocco since the Liberal Age," in Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present* (Cambridge, 2018), 143–162, at 158; Arif Dirlik, "Culturalism as Hegemonic Ideology and Liberating Practice," *Cultural Critique* 6 (1987), 13–50, at 40.

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those who read Laroui as an unambiguous defender of Western liberalism, he imagines local inheritances combining with the intellectual, aesthetic, and scientific influences of Europe and elsewhere. Moreover, these different sources of subjectivity are not merely fused with one another, but instead altered and added to in the process of intercultural encounter, thus creating a genuinely novel subject position.

Finally, his understanding of particularity reveals what is specifically problematic about Moroccan discourses of authenticity. It is not just that they are traditional in orientation. Such discourses are premised on selective readings of the country's past, which reify certain elements as uniquely Moroccan to the exclusion of others.[105] In the process, possibilities for forward-looking change are limited to what such components of the past will allow for. With a more expansive sense of symbolic, literary, and cultural inheritances, as well as an acute appreciation for historical change, Laroui, by contrast, opens subjectivity to a more robust relationship with the past.

Tradition, *turath*, and the abandonment of a particularistic alternative

Laroui's account of historical development also leaves open the possibility that this hoped-for scenario will not be realized. One could argue that this is precisely what happens after his early interventions, as by the mid- to late 1980s he shifts attention in his scholarly work away from authenticity and toward Islam.[106] The turn that he adopts can be explained to a large extent by the waning of Arab nationalism and the corresponding rise of Islamism during these years.

As Fawaz Gerges points out, it would be misleading to understand the decline of the former as following a "straightforward tipping point." It would be more accurate to interpret its trajectory, he writes, with a "longer historical view" in mind, which considers the failed UAR experiment, Egypt's military entanglement in Yemen, conflicts between "revolutionary" and "conservative" Arab states, debt, and other economic woes in different countries in the region, as well as fallout from the defeat of Arab militaries in the June 1967 War.[107] Despite antagonism between those loyal to each across the region, it would also be incorrect to look upon Arab nationalism and Islamism as plainly opposed to one another, given the mutual imbrication between these two major forces of Arab politics throughout the twentieth century.[108]

What was evident nonetheless was that by the 1970s and 1980s Islamism had become more prominent. The 1979 Iranian Revolution and the pan-Islamic sentiments that it inspired in the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond, as well as the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Islamist resistance to the Soviet invasion

[105]Hosam Aboul-Ela, *Domestications: American Empire, Literary Culture, and the Postcolonial Lens* (Evanston, 2018), 64.

[106]Some commentary on the topic can be found in his later work, such as when Laroui criticizes Arab leaders in the latter part of the twentieth century who "boast about authenticity" as a way to distract from their inaction in the face of continued foreign interventions in the region. By this time he considers authenticity to have lost whatever practical purchase it may have previously held, and sees it simply as a source of empty rhetoric forwarded by rulers in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. Abdallah Laroui, *Khawāṭir al-Ṣabāḥ: Yawmīyāt (1982–1999) Ḥujra fī al-ʿUnq* (2005) (Casablanca, 2008), 9.

[107]Gerges, *Making the Arab World*, 284–5.

[108]Ibid., 5–7.

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of Afghanistan that began that same year, importantly contributed to its rise.[109] The active promotion of Islam in law and politics by rulers and revivalist movements in Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and elsewhere also led to the expansion of the faith in public life.[110] Many regimes correspondingly suppressed Arab nationalist and leftist groups during this period, forces whose fortunes likewise declined as a result of the concomitant rise of market liberalization and the withering of social welfare policies, both in the region and around the globe.[111]

Laroui understands the increasing salience of Islam at this moment to be a consequence of an inability to bring about reforms in social and political life. A sense of exhaustion sets in as regards a perceived lack of change, and tradition assumes special appeal as a potential alternative source of action and belief.[112] Tradition is accordingly a reaction, and a particularly active one. It does not only exist passively and immutably, but rather represents a form of resistance against modernity. Understood in this sense, tradition is for Laroui "a form a reformism, a particular type of activism."[113] It arises for him when modernity "appears like an insoluble problem," and makes it so that every aspect of life takes on an "eternal dimension." As he writes, "antimodernism is the thought of the intellectual, regardless of specialization or profession, when one departs from the domain of the transitory and the relative in order to take refuge in that of the eternal and the absolute."[114]

To an extent, there is nothing surprising about this development to Laroui. Modernity historically reveals itself to be a contradictory process, where regressive and progressive forces and patterns of thinking continually compete with one another.[115] To his mind nonetheless the specific shift in the direction of worldviews contrary to rational and historical thinking at this time still demands diagnosis. This is because he sees it as part of a trend around the globe where universalism is increasingly put into question.[116] The local causes of this broad proclivity consequently require attention in order to contest it at both levels.

[109]Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, "Introduction: The Sectarianization Thesis," in Hashemi and Postel, eds., *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (Oxford, 2017), 1–14, at 10; Safwan M. Masri, *Tunisia: An Arab Anomaly* (New York, 2017), 25; Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (New York, 2015), 103; Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, 2007), 288–9, 326–30.

[110]Rosie Bsheer, "A Counter-revolutionary State: Popular Movements and the Making of Saudi Arabia," *Past and Present* 238/1 (2018), 233–77, at 238; Gerges, *Making the Arab World*, 310–31; Toby Jones, "The Dogma of Development: Technopolitics and Power in Saudi Arabia," in Bernard Haykel, Thomas Hegghammer, and Stéphane Lacroix, eds., *Saudi Arabia in Transition: Insights on Social, Political, Economic and Religious Change* (New York, 2015), 31–47, at 43–4.

[111]Laura Guazzone and Daniela Pioppi, "Interpreting Change in the Arab World," in Guazzone and Pioppi, eds., *The Arab State and Neo-liberal Globalization: The Restructuring of State Power in the Middle East* (Reading, 2009), 1–15, at 7–11; Adam Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East* (Chicago, 2013), 27–31.

[112]Abdallah Laroui, *Islamisme, modernisme, libéralisme: Esquisses critiques* (1997) (Casablanca, 2009), 7.

[113]Ibid., 40.

[114]Ibid., 49.

[115]Bayqi, "Mafhūm al-Ḥadātha fī Fikr Abdallah Laroui," 80; Abdallah Laroui, *ʿAwā'iq al-Taḥdīth* (Rabat, 2006), 14.

[116]Abdallah Laroui, *Islam et modernité* (1987) (Casablanca, 2001), 94.

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Additionally, although his focus on Islam speaks to the particularities of the late twentieth century, the role that tradition plays for Laroui in Arab societies at this moment overlaps in significant ways with its function during previous decades. The past, and its significance to the construction of subjectivity, was central to the problems of the immediate postcolonial phase for Arab intellectuals that he elucidated in *L'idéologie*.[117] Islamic tradition, to him, was also at the heart of certain earlier discourses of authenticity. Furthermore, Laroui charges that just like defenders of authenticity previously, Islamist movements and thinkers argue ahistorically, and reduce European thought and culture to the legacies of empire.[118]

Laroui's characterization of the increased influence of faith in the Arab world at this moment suffers from notable exaggerations. His reading of political Islam and traditionalism as reactionary or antimodernist *tout court*, for instance, overlooks the complicated relationship that different figures and movements associated with these notions have with modern institutions, values, and technologies. It is also not the case that all expressions of Islamic tradition are inattentive to history and/or are anti-Western. Laroui's judgments, though, are not exhausted by these exaggerations. More complexly, he questions the assumption found amongst certain proponents of tradition that inherited concepts can serve as equivalents to contemporary ones and the realities in politics and society that they are meant to speak to.[119] Such an assumption results, for him, in a new mode of synthetic or eclectic thinking, which would renege on the achievements of more recent modes of thought.[120]

Laroui offers his most explicit statement of this position in his 1996 book *Mafhūm al-ʿAql: Maqāla fī al-Mufāraqāt* (The Concept of Rationality: A Discourse on Paradoxes). The rise of Islamism undoubtedly informs this study, but just as important is what Laroui sees as the scholarly counterpart to this political development: intense discussion and promotion of the religio-cultural heritage of Islam by Arab intellectuals.[121] Thinkers such as al-Jabiri, and Moroccan philosopher Abdurrahman Taha (1944–), for Laroui, embark on a misguided search for Islamic origins, and relate to Euro-American thinking and values in a closed-minded fashion.[122] This scholarly position lends support, according to him, to practical efforts to revive tradition, which compels his reiterated defense of modernity and modernization.[123]

Arguably the main "paradox" alluded to in the subtitle to Laroui's text is that Arab intellectuals and ordinary people alike boast that the heritage of Islam is fundamentally one of rationality, and yet everyday life in Arab–Islamic societies demonstrates the

[117]Belkeziz, *Naqd al-Turāth*, 26.

[118]Laroui, *Islamisme, modernisme, libéralisme*, 187–8.

[119]Affaya, *Al-Nahḍa al-Muʿalaqqa*, 77.

[120]Mustafa al-Gharafi, "Al-Burhān al-Ṯaqāfī fī al-Mashrūʿ al-Ḥadāthī li-Abdallah Laroui," in Al-Dahi, *Al-Naghma al-Muwākiba*, 287–304, at 292.

[121]Antwan Sayf, "Al-Mafhūm wa al-ʿAql ʿinda Laroui," in *Hakadha Takallum Abdallah Laroui*, 97–136, at 101.

[122]Laroui, *Khawāṭir al-Ṣabāḥ*, 222–4.

[123]Kamal ʿAbd al-Latif, *Dars Laroui fī al-Difāʿ ʿan al-Ḥadātha wa al-Taʾrīkh* (Rabat, 2014), 14.

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opposite. Nonrational behavior abounds, and stands as evidence of the lack of assimilation of the core aspect of modernity.[124] For this reason, and in contrast with other Arab intellectuals whom he accuses of at least implicitly endorsing its terms, Laroui argues for a "rupture with the content of *turath*."[125]

As he goes on to explain in the text, this break involves a rejection of textually based theocentric rationality in favor of immanent, historically and empirically based, means–ends rationality.[126] The latter, to him, is to be imbibed through habitual practice, and realized in both private and public life.[127] There are notable parallels between Laroui's late concern with heritage and tradition on the one hand, and his erstwhile evaluations of authenticity on the other. However, he refrains from elaborating an alternative notion of subjectivity that would correspond to his earlier conception of particularity.

This prompts the question of what becomes lost when Laroui abandons an emphasis on particularity. He forsakes a focus on combining different sources of culture in order to imagine a new subject. What he offers instead is more a single-minded focus on a break with tradition in order to combat what he considers the bases of Islamist politics. The development of history, as a result, takes a narrow shape, no longer defined by dynamism and the potential for creative remaking. Attention to the injuries that are the legacies of European empire is jettisoned as well. Even while framing rationality as a broadly shared component of collective life around the world, he additionally moves closer to the dichotomous framing of Europeanness versus Arabness that he earlier objected to as a false alternative. The implication of this shift is that particularity is a quaint concern of a time gone by, when decolonization was in its heyday in the Middle East and North Africa, and the reconstruction of subjectivity was a critical question.

His commitments to the rationalization of public and private life and to independence of thought in Arab societies remain consistent across his career. If anything, these commitments become more pronounced in his late work.[128] His unwillingness to couple this emphasis with a sense of how seemingly universalist values are practiced and thought in unique ways, though, leaves Laroui vulnerable to the objection of undue generality when theorizing the process of modernization that some of his interlocutors charge him with. This may prove to Laroui to be a less important matter than the need to contest retrograde intellectual trends. It positions him nonetheless without a positive conception of how the universal and the particular can combine, something that, at least in the immediate postcolonial period of the 1960s and 1970s, he deemed a necessary antidote to the excesses of authenticity.

In more recent years, in possible response to his more sympathetic critics who agree with the basic thrust of his call for the need for modern changes but consider his call for "rupture" with the past to be too stark,[129] Laroui gestures toward a more conciliatory

[124]Laroui, *Mafhūm al-ʿAql*, 74.

[125]Ibid., 11.

[126]Ibid., 360–61.

[127]Ibid., 364.

[128]ʿAbd al-Latif, *Dars Laroui*, 51.

[129]Mohammed Sabila, for instance, argues that it is not possible to dismiss heritage, whether in the Middle East and North Africa or in other regions: "For heritage is not simply an outlook that we have transmitted

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engagement with Islam and Islamic heritage. He argues, for instance, that instead of straightforwardly jettisoning *turath*, he wants to "break with it in order to return to it."[130] In a similar vein he writes that "what is demanded is not necessarily the rejection of the heritage of the past, but rather to engage with it realistically and with discerning vision."[131]

These are, however, only perfunctory comments. He does not turn to Islamic heritage, or to other local sources of knowledge and culture, in order to argue for a new subject. The other features that structure his conception of particularity are likewise missing from these brief remarks. By this is meant that the gravity of the colonial era and its persistent effects are overlooked. His openness to combining different understandings of self-identity in order to come up with inventive, and historically evolving senses of the subject also drops out of his thought. Laroui leaves his audience with a defensive posture, chastened by setbacks for progressive political and intellectual forces suffered over preceding decades, and intent on preventing a more conservative drift in the Arab region.

One can only speculate as to why Laroui's defense of particularity disappears from his later thinking. For one thing, as argued above, he was already hesitant to elaborate such a notion at length, given his historicist method, and belief that it is incumbent on later generations to craft the contours of a future subject. Just as important is the new historical context that shapes his interventions from the 1980s forward. Comments from an entry in his personal diaries in the late 1990s provide an indication of his thinking on this score:

> The reality is that the existing rupture, which I only called for a recognition and acceptance of as a point of departure, has unfortunately remained at the level of thought and the psyche, and has not been established as a plan for societal renewal and the resumption of history. The dichotomy has become generalized and deepened, on its heels indecision and impotence have become established, and it has facilitated the emergence of a counter-rupture.[132]

Laroui's thoughts in this entry show his frustration over the absence of the type of transformations that he argued for in his early writings. A "counter-rupture," or a deepening of tradition, appears to him as a more pressing problem. He is thus more concerned about challenging what he sees as the shortcomings of an embrace of one's religio-cultural background than he is about elaborating a positive conception of subjectivity in response.

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and that we can toss in the dustbin." See Mohammed Sabila, "Mas'alat al-Ḥadātha fī Kitābāt Abdallah Laroui," *Al-Thaqāfa Al-'Arabīya* 17 (2000), 65–9, at 68.

[130]Abdallah Laroui, "Al-Ḥadātha wa al-Dīn: Ḥiwār ma' al-Ustādh al-Mufakkir Abdallah Laroui," *Amal* 49 (2016), 101–32, at 110.

[131]Abdallah Laroui, *Min Diwān al-Siyāsa* (Casablanca, 2010), 61.

[132]Laroui, *Khawāṭir al-Ṣabāḥ: Yawmīyāt (1982–1999)*, 224.

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Conclusion

Contrary to the interpretations of his contemporaries and others, Laroui did not offer a straightforward endorsement of liberal universalism as a reaction to the predicaments of the decolonizing subject. As I have shown in this article, his response was more subtle. At least from the 1960s to the 1980s, he was intent on imagining historical development in Morocco and other Arab-majority regions along the lines of what he takes to be features shared with other parts of the world. At the same time, he affirmed a sense that these regions boasted unique forms of thought, expression, and collective organization that should be amalgamated with those from Europe to which they were forcibly exposed. To this extent, Laroui's arguments align with those of other intellectuals from the global South who adopt a hybridizing perspective with regard to postcolonial subject formation. His later departure from this position is as revealing of his evolution as a thinker as it is of the political circumstances that precipitated it, and it discloses what for him were the essential challenges facing Morocco and the broader region of which it is a part several decades removed from independence.

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