

Arkoun: Politics and Modernity

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Prepared for presentation at the
Conference on the Work of Mohammed Arkoun
Carthage, Tunisia, December 18, 1993

Revised, January 18, 1995

Social science has lost two of its two normative moorings, development theory and the notion of self-determination. Development theory, as a universalistic recipe for the future of all economies, polities, societies, and cultures, does not adequately chart a path for even Western countries where the theories emerged, much less for non-Western areas. The idea of self-determination, implying that any group of people ought to be able to determine its own fate and norms, continues to bring chaos and instability wherever it is invoked. Neither the idea of development nor the notion of self-determination has succeeded in providing a foundation for political legitimacy and stability in the new states.

The ideas have failed to fulfill the needs of the new states for opposite reasons. Development theory emerged from the Western experience; when it speaks of an increasingly differentiated economy, a polity based on increasing participation, a society more and more oriented toward achievement, and an increasingly secular, universal culture, it may describe phases of Western development and experience. The non-Western world has found itself both a willing and an unwilling participant in a similar experience without necessarily identifying with the norms. In fact, many groups in the West, including environmentalists, ethnic and cultural minorities, newly vocal antagonists of "secular humanism," and critics of populism also disclaim allegiance to developmental goals. Developmentalism's appeal and success lies in its ability to account for factual trends and to reflect the material, social, and political aspirations of some groups worldwide. Its failure stems from its inability to explain the way millions of ordinary people see the world. It fails on the subjective side, which ultimately compromises even its capacity to provide objective judgment. Its longstanding unwillingness to take the Islamist movement seriously is a case in point.

The idea of self-determination fails, on the other hand, precisely because it bases itself exclusively in a subjective reality. Pursued to an extreme, it entitles any group to claim the right to self rule, whether or not those claims conflict with the claims of others. The idea was unworkable in Europe between the wars; it remains disastrous in the post-Soviet world of EurAsia, and it has not provided a formula for peace and stability in the Middle East.¹ Self-determination has turned out to be a defense of arbitrary political decisions, those permitted by the international political system and those backed by sufficient internal force. Its romantic, historicist, subjective, particularistic appeal flies in the face of global realities.

The legitimacy crisis in the Arab world and in the non-Western world more generally results in considerable measure from the failures of these ideas. Modernization has almost everywhere undermined traditional rationales for government and suggested only alternatives bearing the stigma of foreignness. Unable to generate consensus on any one objective, governments embrace several ideologies at a time, even seemingly inconsistent ones.² States with arbitrarily determined boundaries struggle to prove they are one "people," deserving of the right of self-government, at the expense of both broader conceptions such as Arabism and Islam and narrower ones, such as Kurdism. Lacking recourse to ideas of both internal and external validity, these states impose arbitrary, ideological visions, arguing that the alternative is chaos. The recent history of Lebanon lends substance to that claim.

A political scientist approaches the work of Mohammed Arkoun in hopes of finding guidance in the search for solutions to the legitimacy question underpinning these ongoing political dramas. To what extent can Arkoun from his vantage point on the margins of East and West

remain faithful to the liberal instincts of Western social science from a perspective that "feels right" in the Islamic world? To what extent can he defend the autonomy of multiple identities without further compromising the ability of the human species to live together? Is it possible to insist upon the historicity of human values, as Arkoun does, and end up with any sort of permanent, reliable foundation upon which to build a more stable world?

Arkoun wrestles explicitly with the dilemma of development theory and implicitly with the problem of self-determination. In the end, he advocates a non-secularist, liberal world in which a postmodern social science steers the way toward broadly shared humane values. From the quandaries and relativities of postmodernity, and from the critique of all traditional wisdom, he gropes his way toward fresh certainties upon which a future might be built. He emerges as a believer in the capacity of the social sciences to produce truthfulness in a world of multiple truths.

Development Theory

For Arkoun, development theory has failed to reflect the concrete experience of human beings, because it has transcendentalized the concepts of both tradition and modernity. While social scientists mythologized the Western experience into a model of modernization, Orientalists mythologized the Islamic experience into a monolith impervious to historical change. While some regimes have invoked ideologies based on the modernization model, others, paralleling the efforts of the Orientalists, have transcendentalized the Arab and Islamic past to establish Islam as the basis of ideology. Both the radical secularism of the modernists and the traditionalism of the Islamists neglect history and represent efforts to impose upon individuals, groups, and societies views that are not their own.

Development theory stems directly from the Enlightenment and its drive for universal generalizations. In what has become the most famous (and perhaps most criticized) notion of modernity, Talcott Parsons speaks of the shift from consummatory to rational (secular) values, from diffuse to differentiated roles, from ascription to achievement as the basis of role allocation, and from parochialism to universalism in psychological orientation.³ As has often been observed, no modern society completely reflects Parsons' qualities of modernity, and no traditional society reflects the qualities of tradition.⁴ Both concepts are models, or, as Arkoun would put it, they are efforts to transcendentalize moments of Western and non-Western experience. The concepts reflect the logocentrism of the Western tradition so thoroughly exposed and excoriated by Nietzsche.

The Marxist versions of development theory also demonstrate an unwillingness to confront the perceptions of individuals and the peculiarities of history. They, too, construct grand, non-falsifiable theories about the direction in which history is moving, and human beings appear to be but pawns in the process, consumed by their religious delusions or liberated from them by the "consciousness-raising" of those who know better. As with Parsonian theory, a universalistic understanding of modernity presupposes a comparable notion of tradition.

Arkoun argues that the Islamic establishment has unwittingly reinforced the arguments of developmentalists and Orientalists by transcendentalizing the Islamic past. With his work on Miskawayh, Arkoun shows how the introduction of the idealizing tradition of Greece first served the forces of change in the Islamic world, and how, once captured and subjugated by the establishment, it became a foundation for what Arkoun calls Islamic Reason.⁵ The Islamic mainstream constructed an essentialist, logocentric approach to history and society that ultimately snuffed out creativity, empirical investigation, and social innovation. The Western *imaginaire* of Islam reflects a view that the Islamic establishment itself sought to create and perpetuate and which Western Orientalists absorbed and elaborated: the view of Islam as a highly coherent, theologically oriented, unchanging, all-encompassing "way of life."⁶

The contemporary Islamist movement has, in Arkoun's view, sought to further transcendentalize the Islamic experience by converting it into a modern political ideology. Arkoun reproaches the Islamic establishment for not recognizing that its own reading of the Qur'an and the hadith reflect concrete historical actions, themselves spurred by political intent. He has written in great detail about the emergence of the *musṣḥaf* in the early centuries of the Islamic experience.⁷ He is sharply critical of Islamists who would further idealize the past for political purposes of the present.

These conceptions of modernity and tradition thus share a common flaw: They ignore historicity. On the one hand, Westerners fail to understand the peculiar circumstances in which the Enlightenment emerged in the West. When Mustafa Kemal ripped the idea of secularism from the Western experience and patched it into Turkish society as a key to modernization, he was no more guilty of anachronism than the European theorists of modernity.⁸ On the other hand, the Islamic establishment systematically misreads history in order to define an orthodoxy by which core groups can be defined and legitimated. Khariji and the diverse Shi'i sects cling to their own readings of Islamic history to prove their singular virtue, and contemporary Islamist groups propagate still other exclusivist and anachronistic views. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity remain divided by differing versions of history.

These mutually reinforcing efforts to deduce history from ideological positions have produced a gulf between majorities and minorities, elites and masses. Visions of progress dear to planners in Cairo or Tunis may not coincide with peasant conceptions of a better life. Urban ulema pay little heed to rural saint cultures. Islamist groups characterize themselves as "true Muslims" and fellow citizens as non-Muslims, whether or not they profess Islam. Berbers, Kurds, and Copts find it difficult to identify with predominant ideologies and find themselves treated as second-class citizens.

Arkoun seeks a way out of these dilemmas arising from the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. In what I regard as one of the most eloquent statements of his agenda and methodology, he writes:

Comment remédier, en particulier, à ce sentiment lancinant qu'une grande partie de ce qui s'écrit ou se dit sur la personnalité du Maghreb reste extérieur au pays réel, inadéquat ou franchement faux par rapport aux divers témoignages vivants que les groupes porteraient sur eux-mêmes si une idéologie contraignante ne limitait leur créativité, leur voies de réalisation intellectuelle et culturelle? Pourquoi recontre-t-on chez tant de maghrébins cette irrépressible nostalgie de *possibles* fortement ressentis, mais toujours différés, refoulés, réprouvés: *possible* d'une conscience coïncidant avec les données immédiates d'un terroir, d'un environnement, d'une histoire, d'un ordre social, d'un langage; *possible* d'une culture nationale libérée des modèles conventionnels abstraits (musique, poésie, décoration, architecture), de l'imitation des genres et des réalisations importés, des idées et des goûts d'une intelligentsia arabisée ou occidentalisee....⁹

The starting point for theory must be particular, lived, and concrete, not generalizations abstracted in previous generations for political purposes related to previous historical moments. The starting point must be anchored in feeling and sentiment, not in rational understanding alone, for the assumption that rationality alone produces truth cannot be sustained except by resort to faith. The possibilities for *authentic* development lurk in the particularities of place, milieu, and time. The thorough exploration and exposition of those particularities generate possibilities not yet imagined. Development would mean a course of events linked to past experience by inspiration

rather than imitation or deviation and legitimated not by transcendentalized schemes but by felt truthfulness at the lowest and broadest level.

Arkoun sees modern scholarly endeavor in what he calls the "human sciences" as the key to uncovering the range of possibilities heretofore obscured by ideological readings of past and present. He calls for an interdisciplinary exploration of the "exhaustive Islamic tradition," starting from the "Qur'anic fact," in order to explain all the things that Islam has come to be as well as what remains unthought and even unthinkable within the Islamic tradition.¹⁰ The most modern (or postmodern) tools must be employed to reveal the power and importance of mythmaking at every moment and level of history as well as to reveal the mechanisms of mythologization used to freeze or limit creativity, and the study of the past upon which creativity depends. All the streams of the Islamic experience deserve respect as partial representations of a truth that ultimately resides in the exhaustive tradition.

The contrast between such an understanding of development and the mainstream notions of Western social science lies in its acceptance of culture in all its particularity not just as a point of departure but as a repository of resources, its eschewal of mechanistic, universalistic conceptions of cultural evolution in favor of multiple, diverse, freely chosen paths, its radical rejection of both modern and traditional teleologies, and its emphasis upon the unity of the human experience by virtue of experience rather than by common processes of ratiocination. Yet his concept of development depends upon the existence of a science capable of generating truth. Arkoun's attack upon standard development theory depends not upon a refutation of the social sciences but upon the superiority of recent, post-modern methodologies. A postmodern understanding of myth and historicity permits the relativization of exclusivist, ideological claims to truth. A new foundation must be constructed on the complete understanding of the exhaustive Islamic tradition. Hence Arkoun's exhortations to legions of scholars from a variety of disciplines. He believes in a science sufficiently reliable and unified by common modes of reasoning that it will be capable of expanding the realm of truth and establishing a new discourse of legitimacy in the West.

The question is whether science can provide a foundation for political construction, once the certainties of both tradition and modernity have been abandoned. Does Arkoun open the way toward "saving" the Islamic tradition from its staunchest advocates, or does he only open the way toward its relativization by the endeavors of science and the fervent embrace of historicity? Can empiricism succeed where essentialism has failed in supplying a truth upon which to build a liberal society of the sort Arkoun admires?

Arkoun espouses an open, free, secular society as the only atmosphere in which these issues can be confronted. For Arkoun, the radical secularizing forces of liberalism, unleashed with special ferocity by the French revolution, represent a distortion of liberal thought and practice. He points out that civil religion has arisen to supplant or supplement Christianity as a prop for some Western states, further weakening the case that complete separation of religion and politics is a prerequisite of liberalism. According to Arkoun, Muslim hostility toward liberalism stems in part from misunderstandings fostered by the Kemalist experiment with a radically secular brand of liberalism in Turkey. Of course, the identification of liberalism with British and French imperialism further tarnished its reputation, and developmentalists steeped in the ethos of secularism did little to restore its luster in so-called Muslim countries. Liberalism has been on the defensive as imperialism has beaten its retreat.

Arkoun's bold embrace of liberal democracy reflects his conviction that within Islam, as within Christianity and Judaism, there lies a profound respect for the person.¹¹ He denies the claims of some that Islam contains a full-blown doctrine of human rights or a theory of democracy waiting

to be implemented. He calls such claims apologetic. Rather, he argues that there exists within the Islamic tradition the possibility for the emergence of liberalism, but that possibility has not yet been fully realized. If the unfolding of such a possibility requires the sort of scientific research and unfettered analysis Arkoun talks about, then it may require access to a liberal atmosphere even before a basis for liberal democracy can be created. While Arkoun long argued that the required social science could only be done outside the predominantly Muslim countries, where nationalist movements and collaborating ulama have enforced narrow-minded ideologies, he acknowledges that some independent thinking has begun to emerge in North African universities. The convening of a conference in Tunis to study Arkoun's work shows that the political atmosphere in at least one Arab country permits consideration of the questions Arkoun deems essential.

Arkoun champions liberal democracy as a political atmosphere in which demythologization can occur and new possibilities be unleashed; in fact, the demythologization of Western liberalism would free it of its radical secularist convictions and, hence, its origins. Yet one wonders whether liberalism can survive such deconstruction.

Liberalism emerged in the West from strong belief in natural law; "We hold these truths to be self-evident," reads the American Declaration of Independence. Writers from Toqueville¹² to Huntington¹³ have emphasized the degree to which Americans have remained attached to a democratic "creed," reflective of ideals that have not been realized and are perhaps unrealizable. The mythologized founding still serves to anchor liberal institutions and to open the way to the competition of less grandiose ideas. The British remain attached to monarchy and Church. The French hold to the slogans of the French Revolution, even as they move from one constitution to another. Could liberal institutions survive without reference to essences and ideas that Arkoun would expose as so many more myths among myths?

At moments Arkoun writes as if no truth can defy historicity; truth based in reason enjoys no privilege in that regard over truth based in faith or mysticism. Postmodernist thought sweeps him toward such a position. Yet the commitment he shows toward science implies a commitment to truthfulness; when he writes of the "exhaustive Islamic tradition," or the societies based on revealed religions, he sounds as if these phenomena could be circumscribed and understood in scientific fashion. When he writes of a Maghribians yearning for a reality they could call their own (see above), he also suggests a standard of truthfulness. Arkoun pushes us to search for a sort of truthfulness that could sustain human rights and a set of liberal democratic institutions. That truthfulness would emerge from the scientific study of the totality of human experience.

Self-Determination

No theorist has yet suggested a firm ground for the defense of what constitutes a "people" or a "society" deserving of liberal institutions. The notion of self-determination, popularized by Woodrow Wilson with apparent intent to rationalize the Balkans, declares that a people has a right to decide its own fate, without specifying the critical point: the definition of a people. Most states, liberal and authoritarian, remain utterly arbitrary creations. That in many such states citizens have come to think of themselves as a "people" does not help other states where such a feeling is patently missing.

The drive to create "peoples" within boundaries drawn by nature, by imperialism, or by war has almost everywhere created disaffected minority groups, who do not recognize themselves in the emerging definitions. Islamists have become the latest force to try to reshape the conception of "the people;" the *umma* consists of "true" Muslims, which excludes not just Christians, Jews, and other religious groups but even Muslims who do not subscribe to their ideology. But Arab nationalists and Islamic establishments have also sought to elaborate non-arbitrary definitions of peoplehood.

With his defense of all perceptual realities and historical experiences, Arkoun inveighs against all such efforts. His analysis brings Sunni, Shi'a, and Khariji together within the complete Islamic tradition. Moreover, by insisting that the Islamic experience be seen as one instance of revelation, comparable to the Jewish and Christian experiences, he further expands the universe of discourse. His discussion of societies of the Book/book lead him toward a conception of the whole Mediterranean basin as a political unit, united by its historical experience even though divided in recent centuries by closed-mindedness and nationalistic, ideological, even racist thinking on both the northern and southern shores.¹⁴ The dynamic of his analysis drives him from the particular to the general, and the next step would carry him into anthropological discussion of the bifurcation between societies of the Book and those without recourse to revelation. All the "natural" divisions of the human species turn out to be products of human construction and experience; more accurately, the invocation of so-called "natural" boundaries occurs for demonstrable political reasons at identifiable moments in human history. All are contingent rather than essential.

Arkoun's argument tends to discount claims for naturally occurring partition of the human species. His position reflects his understanding of historicity. Political organization arises to meet concrete needs and then decays or transforms itself in the face of new conditions. The Athenian democracy, the Roman Republic, the *umma* in Medina, the modern liberal state--all are explicable by reference to concrete historical circumstances that cannot be perpetuated by ideologizing their driving concepts. The nation-state will presumably work its way toward the dustbin of history. All political arrangements are fleeting rather than transcendent.

It is less certain, though, that such a view can be reconciled with Arkoun's passionate commitment to liberal, democratic values. However post-modern his methods, Arkoun appears to espouse a thoroughly modern commitment to humanism. What draws him toward the scientific study of culture and religion is the hope of revealing more of what it means to be human; he would have us think, in particular, about the common spiritual and symbolic needs of all human beings. He is drawn by the possibility of ever greater truthfulness about the human condition, and he defends liberal democracies for their capacity to create an atmosphere in which truth can be pursued, if not conquered. Liberal values would appear by virtue of their roots in humanism to survive the forces of history.

Liberalism has flourished most easily in places where religious tradition and political expediency have combined to lend plausibility to the conception of "natural rights." The myth of a single, natural "people" emerged first in France and Britain, and won acceptance and eventual embrace as a function of constitutional experience in the United States, though not without civil war. Where the definition of a single "people" was more problematic, as in Belgium, not to mention Lebanon, the foundation and maintenance of liberal institutions proved more difficult. Consociationalism has foundered. If one were to follow Arkoun's argument, which regards human communities as contingent products of history, and to demythologize the notion of a "people" with rights to determine its political fate--indeed, if one were to argue that such nationalism is altogether pernicious--could the notion of liberal democracy itself be saved from the destruction of one of its (largely implicit) foundations?

Arkoun would perhaps think liberal democracy can be saved by laying new foundations in a truth to be revealed by the feverish exertion of scholars like himself, committed to the explanation of the human experience in all its richness. The dynamic of his argument leads from the breakdown of myth and the exposure of exclusivist ideologies toward the pursuit of a new, more authentic truth--first about Islam, then about the societies of the Book/book, and finally, perhaps, about the whole human species. He would have us rediscover an authentic way of being in the world that would underlie the multiplicity of claims to exclusive truth (including those linked with the word *'aṣala*.) Such authenticity would refound liberal democracy, freeing it from its ties to the Christian

West and making it available to all as a set of rules under which the search for truth could continue.¹⁵ The underlying impulse of his thought is toward the renewal and preservation of truthfulness, human values, faith, peace, and order, not toward the destruction such values. Arkoun is profoundly conservative in this respect.

Yet political consequences are often perverse; profoundly conservative purposes often turn out to produce radical results. In fact, Arkoun's dedication to authenticity constitutes criticism of all existing political arrangements, both East and West. He challenges the nation-state as a naturally justified phenomenon, and attacks the ideologies and myths generated to sustain political arrangements in both the Christian and Islamic worlds. While he exhorts us to tolerance and respect for all fragments of the human experience, he wants us to think of them as partial, contingent, and arbitrary. The frail legitimacy of states already assaulted by the fervor of Arab nationalists and pan-Islamists suffers a further blow from Arkoun's way of thinking. A political leader may find some defense against the plurality of strident voices that assault him, but his own effort to portray himself as the defender of the nation-state erodes under the withering analysis of mythmaking. Arkoun's brand of authenticity appears more corrosive of politics and more radical than many sorts of contemporary Islamism. While his view may be equally damaging to legitimacy in the Western democracies, those societies are not likely to respond to scientific breakthroughs by abandoning the myths on which their public life depends. In the new states, however, where the basis of politics is much more tenuous, the legitimacy problem looms as large as ever.

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Arkoun is radical in his attacks on development theory, its underlying distinctions between tradition and modernity, and the universality of its propositions. His methodology serves to relativize the foundations of developmentalism and render explicit the contingent, arbitrary character of self-defining policies. In that sense his work appears destructive of existing polities; he challenges not merely the exclusivist, authoritarian ideologies of the Arab states but the foundations of liberal democracy in the West. Similarly his understanding of language, culture, and historicity undermine claims that there exist natural, permanent subdivisions of the human species called "peoples," who are the proper authors of liberal democratic states. In these ways Arkoun appears to break cleanly with political modernity.

Yet Arkoun's project leads not into relativism and anarchism but toward a refounding of politics, a rediscovery of human values, a reopening of conversation between majorities and minorities in the Muslim world, the societies of the Book, and the world at large. His belief in the "human sciences" leads him toward a politics of "authentic" development, skeptical of universal recipes but committed nonetheless to a concept of truthfulness that permits the reconstruction of ethical and political life. That Arkoun aims at a refounding rather than a permanent dismantling is shown by his desire to put the Mediterranean region back together again and his advocacy of liberal democracy as a framework in which science can be done and all voices heard. His plea for a brand of politics ordinary citizens of the Maghrib can call their on constitutes rejection of ideology-driven authoritarianism and of exclusivist, arbitrary patterns of national identity. But his plea also implies the possibility of an authentic politics, one based in the creativity of peoples steeped in their own cultural experience. Arkoun thus shares in the progressive thrust of development theory and in the democratic impulse of self-determination, although he seeks to pare those concepts of their universalist and exclusivist pretensions. He evokes a thoroughly liberal, democratic, progressive (and therefore modern rather than postmodern) vision of political life. His is a vision of a world without center or periphery, without culture-defining majorities and submissive minorities, without claims to monopoly on truth in any political or religious camp, without imperialism based in either reason or belief, but not without foundational points of reference. It is a compelling vision.

Notes

1. Elie Kedourie's work remains perhaps the most insightful in explicating the theoretical bases of nationalism and in projecting its consequences in the Middle East. See his *Nationalism* (London: Hutchinson, 1960) and other writings.
2. Michael Hudson's *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven: Yale, 1977) remains one of the best statements of the legitimacy problem.
3. See Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1951, Chaps. 2 and 3.
4. See André Gunder Frank, "Sociology of Development and Underdevelopment of Sociology," in James D. Cockcroft et. al, *Dependence and Underdevelopment: Latin America's Political Economy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972).
5. See *L'humanisme arabe au IV^e/X^e siècle: Miskawayh: Philosophe et historien*, 2nd ed. rev., (Paris: Vrin, 1982).
6. See *Ouvertures sur l'Islam*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Grancher, 1992), Chapter 1. English translation forthcoming as *Rethinking Islam* (Boulder: Westview, 1994).
7. See *Ouvertures*, Chap. 7, for a synopsis of the arguments.
8. See Arkoun's "Positivisme et tradition dans une perspective islamique: Le cas du kémalisme," *Diogène*, 127 (July-Sept., 1984).
9. *Pour une critique de la raison islamique*, Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1984, p. 374.
10. See *Ouvertures*, Chap 1; *Critique de la raison islamique*, Chap. 4.
11. See *Ouvertures*, Chap. 21; also "The Topicality of the Problem of the Person in Islamic Thought," *International Social Science Journal*, August, 1988.
12. *Democracy in America*.
13. Samuel Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*.
14. See "Actualité d'une culture méditerranéenne" in *Ouvertures*.
15. I have made this argument at greater length in "Arkoun and Authenticity," *Peuples méditerranéens*, 50 (Jan.-March, 1990), pp. 75-106.