

Identity Politics and the Predicament of the Arab Nation - State

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Abstract: *This study brings into comparative perspective the major takes on the question of identity in the Arab world. It suggests that whilst in Western societies the discussion around identity has centered on questions of racism and the status of minority groups, usually in societies with solid nation - states and democratic traditions, the most influential scholarly contributions in the Arab world have centered on identity with regard to the question of political instability and the nation - state as a vulnerable entity and an unfulfilled project. Apart from a few marginal critical voices that endorse ethnic identity and differentiation, described here as essentialist and in many ways emulative of postmodern identity politics, major scholars view the tendency to reify, endorse, valorize, and politicize ethnic and cultural identity as an obstacle in the process of building genuine nation - states and perpetuate the Arab condition of social traditionalism and historical backwardness. This study ultimately suggests that any attempt to theorize and conceptualize identity should take into account the historical peculiarities of the context in question. More specifically, emphasizing an essentialist view of identity in the Arab world perniciously complicates existing issues of political rule and only deepens the impasse of an unfulfilled Arab nation - state. This study ultimately attempts to add up to a nascent body of literature that seeks to highlight the dangers of essentialism and the pernicious effects of category thinking, namely in historically backward contexts where the luxury of playing the identity card or identity politics cannot be afforded.*

Keywords: Identity, identity politics, essentialism, nation - state, Arabs, Islam, modernity, ethnicity, sectarianism, orientalism folklorization,

1. Introduction

One major hallmark of the post - war Western political landscape is the emergence of an identity - oriented group politics or “identity politics” centered on perceived forms of oppression. Nested in neo - Marxist and postmodernist doctrines, this politics articulates a multiplicity of grievances that all seem to converge on the assumption that exploitation and arbitrary power constitute the foundation of all social structures and the driving engine of Western civilization. One unforeseen offshoot of this new form of politics, however, is the proliferation of hyper - specific group identities articulating multiple intersectional identifications and thusly subject to multiplex forms of oppression, engendering criticisms of intra - group division and detracting attention from what critics regard as more substantive forms of inter - group struggle. One such criticism coming from the left emphasized the divisive impact of hyper - specific identity politics on class politics, casting these identities as ideological constructs that conceal real, more substantive cross - group economic inequalities, and buttress the forces of social regulation (Fraser, 1995; Hobsbawm, 1996; Miles, 1982).

Identity politics has also been used to refer to the nativist nationalist agendas of the right, ultra - right, and far right movements. The xenophobic prepositions of these movements have been so pivotal to the prominence of the radical right movements in electoral politics over the last few decades that centrist and leftist parties have explored their lure to tap into popular vote (Gilroy, 1987). Here, claims of an endangered national identity and a disintegrating cultural and social fabric as a result of migratory flows and weakened national borders supported the discursive framework for an exclusionary identity politics more commonly known as cultural racism or the “new racism” (Barker, 1981). Nationality is construed here

as expressive of essentialist and unmalleable properties of a distinct group, so outer groups are seen, by virtue of essentialized cultural differences, as incompatible with the autochthonous way of life and unfit to participate in the national community (Kurzweily, Rapport & Spiegel, 2020).

Opponents of identity politics, broadly conceived, have decried what they view as the detrimental impact of group campaigns and grievances, such as diversity inclusion and liberalized illegal immigration on national economies, education, and democratic institutions. One such criticism has been staged by classicist and military historian Victor Davis Hanson. Hanson (2022) posits that, in America, decades of liberal reforms accommodating group demands centered on identity have dismantled citizenship, junked meritocracy, and jeopardized the role of centuries - old democratic institutions. On the civic front, Hanson argues, liberal subsidies on illegal immigration and the weakening of national borders in favor of global migratory flows have eroded the concept of the citizen, weakened allegiance to national territory, and eviscerated the political and economic independence of the American middle class. In education, the preferential admission of minority students to major institutions of higher education which, as in many Ivy League institutions, involved renouncing their strict admission criteria have caused many of these institutions to forsake their commitment to pursue academic excellence and produce professional talent for the national market (Hanson, 2023).

In the Arab world, the “identity question” is perennial and has historically appeared around ethnic, tribal and sectarian conflicts. Various ethnicities, tribes and sects have articulated grievances and organized politically along those identity lines, raising theoretical challenges as to how those identities can be conceptualized. For instance, to what extent are the received theoretical models that emerged in the

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Western academia, where most of the theorizing on identity has been undergone, relevant to the Arab context? In this paper I will suggest that any attempt to read across from the Western context to the Arab world with regard to identity should take into account the theoretical subtleties and nuances that arise from contextual variations in the construction and the conceptualization of different forms of identity. One major subtlety being, in my estimation, that “identity politics”—if that concept can be borrowed at all—in the Arab world has been concomitant to and haunted the project of Arab nationalism and nation - state, unlike the identity politics strands that evolved in the Western world which, for the most part, are *posterior* to the rise of modern nation - states and are largely accepted as a postmodern, late capitalist development. The *historical* differences that these two contexts evince with regard to the development of identity politics raises critical questions about the primacy and the urgency of the identity question in those respective contexts. More pertinent to the condition of ours as Arabs are the following questions: How does the politicization of identity address, if not perpetuate, our condition of social traditionalism as fragmented, deeply tribal societies? How can the impasse of forestalled Arab modernity, deficient nation - states, and historical backwardness be resolved in light of the growing disposition of Arab cultural elites to experiment with and embrace postmodern doctrines of identity politics? Below I will tentatively address those questions by reviewing some of the major contributions on identity in the Arab academia with the aim of assessing their efficiency in accommodating the contextual nuances highlighted above.

The forces of traditionalism and the crisis of the Arab nation - state

One of the most seminal contributions of German sociologist and critical theorist Max Weber to the study of social science is his critical distinction between modern and traditional societies. Weber’s critical paradigm in which “rationality” supports the yardstick for distinguishing “modern” from more traditional societies has been a perennial influence on the study of ethnography, anthropology, sociology, and politics. Weber’s distinction has oftentimes been dismissed as simplistic and Eurocentric. In historiography, for instance, that distinction has triggered a debate about periodization and applicability of European epochal taxonomies to non - European histories (Rodinson, 1969). Such a dismissal, however, offers little in the way of understanding our current juncture (as Arabs and Third - World political subjects) marked by cultural complacency and historical backwardness. In fact, Weber is quick to note that, whilst many of the societies he labels “traditional” did have aspects to their culture that were clearly “rational” (e. g., the ingenious law of ancient Rome, the military prowess of ancient China), that “ancient” rationality remained largely sectorial and failed to spill into the cultural mainstream, unlike modern rationality which is all - encompassing and culture - wide. It started out in science laboratories and the economic practices of Europe’s early capitalists to become the overarching pattern driving politics, family organization, architecture, arts, education and the military (Laroui, 2011b). In light of Weber’s critical distinction, I will examine some of the forces of social traditionalism in the Arab world and how those forces have interfered with the

rationalization and modernization efforts of those societies. Aspects of traditionalism in the Arab society are multiple and more complex than can be expounded within the scope of a single article. I will, therefore, center my discussion on sectarianism, ethnicity and Islamic authenticity as some of the most remarkable aspects of traditionalism in contemporary Arab society.

Sectarian and ethnic divisions have been central to the social, cultural and political dynamics and dwarf other more recent identity articulations, such as class. While class consciousness is burgeoning in the Arab world, due to a rather slow and largely sectorial industrialization, sectarian, ethnic and tribal consciousness, with their emphasis on kin, honor, and religion rather than individuality and rationality, support the primary vehicles for identity construction and differentiation and have crucially governed access to opportunities and resources.

More recently, the division around Shia and Sunna identity has been overriding and some of its most pernicious manifestations involved armed conflict and genocide. Sectarianism also provided the fault lines for electoral politics in countries like Iraq and Syria where sectarian differentiations often trumped efforts of national unification and inhibited the creation of stable states. For instance, Hizbu Allah militias conducting military operations across Lebanon’s national border, in Iraq and Syria, is illustrative of how military alliances along sectarian lines result in vulnerable nation - states with penetrable borders. Similarly, the separatist tendencies of Iraq’s Kurds who hearken to a Kurdish state and a pre - Islamic Zoroastrian culture are also telling of how the lines of an essentialist religious and cultural identity may diverge from those of the nation - state as a distinct political unit, raising challenges of national unity, sovereignty and citizenship.

Arab scholars come from different persuasions in theorizing and conceptualizing identity. One major strand in the research explains the proliferation of ethnic and sectarian identities in terms of the failure of the Arab liberal elites to create a civic political culture based on rights and the rule of law. Sectarianism is backdated here to the rise of tyrannical regimes predicated on Arab nationalism (e. g., *Albaath* party in Iraq) that mobilize ethnic and sectarian sensibilities for electoral gain and social regulation (Ghalioun, 2012). In Lebanon, where sectarian conflicts ushered in more than a decade long civil war, one Marxist take posits that sectarianism is the outcome of a national bourgeois class’s efforts to disguise a deep class war (Amil, 2003). According to this view, the politicization of sectarian differences is a manipulative strategy of the ruling elitist ruling class to detract public attention from class inequalities that cut through traditional ethnic and sectarian divisions. Sectarian identity is elevated here to the status of national particularity that defies comparative cross - national analysis. Amil is critical of the body of literature inspired by political philosopher and one of the founders of modern Lebanon Michel Chiha that defines Lebanese society primarily as an admixture of various sectarian groups and views sectarian identity as fundamental, constitutive and historically stable, reifying sectarian differences and perpetuating category

thinking that does nothing but obscure class contradictions and perpetuate the predicament of the Lebanese state.

Within this essentialist logic, Amil argues, sects are the state's *raison d'être*; the latter's role is reduced to upholding sectarian identities, mediating their interaction, and imbuing them with an institutional aura. The state and sects are seen as mutually sustaining, whereby sects are the constitutive elements of a supposedly unique Lebanese state model often referred to as the "sectarian state" (2003, pp.21 - 22). The individual is defined not as citizen which is the most fundamental unit of analysis in liberal democratic models, but as a member of a sect; the latter providing the nexus between the individual and the state. Rather than a means to transform and unify society above the divisive categories of kin, tribe, ethnicity and sect, the state is made to mirror those essentialized differences and ensure their continuation. That sectarian identities hinge on the state and demand its recognition is, according to Amil, testimony of their primarily historical and ideological nature. Far from being reified essences, sectarian identities are shaky contingent ideological and political constructs that have no meaning beyond the state institutions that sustain them. The abolition of those institutions would necessarily mean the evisceration of those identities (p.25).

Amil is also critical of the tendency of mainstream political scholarship to assume the existence of a centralized state in Lebanon concurring comfortably with institutionalized sectarianism. Centralized state and sectarianism as state's ideology, he argues, are mutually exclusive. That the state is the institutional expression of sects as officially proclaimed in Lebanon presupposes all sects get equal representation in the state; such a presupposition may be theoretically valid, but empirically impossible since more powerful sects will perceptibly demand more state power. A centralized sectarian state would require the existence of a single sect which would essentially mean a racist state. By the same token, polymorphous sectarian identities institutionalized in the state necessarily, as is the case in Lebanon, negates the existence of a centralized state. If Lebanon is to be a centralized state, akin to modern bourgeois state, it has to dispense with sectarianism altogether and cease reproducing sectarian category thinking (Amil, 2003, pp.31 - 33). Only through the state's disposal of reproducing sects and imbuing them with institutional legitimacy can Lebanon move from a fragmented to a homogenous society. Reference here is made to Western democracies where sects may exist, but society is deeply secularized and homogenous.

In the same vein, Bishara (2017) objects to the view that sectarianism in the Arab society is fundamental and is rather the outcome of political rifts dating back to at least the eighth century CE when political divisions and interests tapped into religious differences to serve political agenda. The politicization of sectarian differences by means of the state has as one backlash the upsurge in oppositional sectarian forces vying for attention and political influence. Although sectarian differences did exist in the early Islamic age, political sectarianism as commonly used has not been possible until recently since politics did not exist as a public domain and the political elites did not seek to politicize the

masses. Sectarianism existed only in the religious realm and only in the modern period did it spill over into the public sphere as part of the modern state's need for social regulation.

On Bishara's account, political sectarianism is thusly an intentional and conscious exercise of exploiting religious differences to shape new identities for political returns. All warring sects mobilize narratives of sectarian oppression, including sects in the position of political dominance. It follows that the sect, in its modern political form, is by definition an oppressed group. This collectivist political model based on group oppression and grievances rather than the individual and civic responsibility hollows out the state and undermines efforts of secularizing the Arab public sphere. Bishara goes on to argue that where sectarianism has been exploited by Arab regimes, it is not the sole prism for understanding political conflict. He cites evidence cases of political oppression that cut across sectarian lines, including sectarian groups allied to political regimes. One example being Saddam Hussein's *Hizb Al'baath* which Bishara refuses to consider as a Sunnminority party pitted against Iraq's Shiites, since many of Saddam's victims were Sunni opponents of political regime (2017).

Another key, albeit overlooked, influence on the study of identity is Moroccan historian and cultural critic Abdallah Laroui. Laroui is reluctant to buy into the commonly held view that sectarian and ethnic cleavage typical of traditional Arab society is merely the byproduct of recent Arab tyrannical regimes' need for social regulation and electoral gains. For Laroui, such a view fails, for instance, to account for the failure of consecutive Arab governments led by enlightened Marxists and liberals to usher in full - scale modernization of social and cultural structures. For example, the transition into industrialization in many Arab states has remained primarily sectorial and failed to seep into the social mainstream which remains profoundly traditional (2011a). In the Weberian fashion Laroui rejects univariate explanations and refuses to lay the failure of liberalism entirely at the feet of Arab regimes that use liberal propaganda to conceal their tyrannical autocratic nature. To understand the origins of the identity question in the Arab world Laroui suggests piercing into the Arab political history and the political tradition Arabs have inherited from the past.

As a proponent of conceptual analysis and a stalwart historian and political scientist who is well - versed in continental political philosophy, mainly Marxism and historicism, Laroui refuses to take for granted the political concepts Arab liberals use. Just like he does with the concept of "liberty" to which I shall return later, Laroui delves into the meaning of the "state" in the Arab deliberative sphere. The identity question is analyzed here with relation to the nature of the Arab state, the genealogy of which he offers in some of his most seminal works on ideological criticism. In *Mafhu'm Addaoula* [The Concept of the State] (2011) Laroui reviews the major theoretical perspectives on the state by juxtaposing the meanings it has acquired in the Western political tradition with those assigned to it by Arab jurists, philosophers, historians, as well as in the Arab political culture.

Laroui first makes a case for the Hegelian position that champions the state over the individual¹ whereby the former is the only realm where the latter's liberty can be conceived. Beyond the state, Hegel claims, the individual and liberty have no meaning. In fact, liberty in its substantive modern form is the corollary of the state. Contrary to the anarchist proposition, the state is a natural development and germinates from society's need to accommodate individual liberties. It follows that, after Hegel, any perceived opposition between the state and the individual is only transitory and will inevitably be resolved in the eventuality of objective history—ultimately in the absolute (Laroui, 1981, p.43).

Hegel's skepticism towards the Enlightenment's fervent championing of the individual is grounded in Machiavelli's realism which posits that an ideal state entails an ideal individual; the latter, however, has no existence in objective reality. To assume his existence amounts to political utopia and offers little in the way understanding human nature and the evolution of the historical process. Hegel is impressed by the Prussian political model where the state retained a pivotal role and property defined political participation, unlike Enlightenment's emphasis on the minimal state (p.60). It is the realism of Hegel and his Machiavellian inspiration that Laroui juxtaposes with the utopianism of the Arab political tradition, a point I will expound in detail below.

As diverse as they may appear (e. g., republican, monarchical, socialist, reactionary, liberal), a remarkable feature of contemporary Arab states is the concurrence of modern structures (e. g., bureaucracy, land reform, industrialization, modern army, formal education, secularized liberal constitutions) that are the legacy of the liberal reforms of the colonial era (Dawlat A'ttanzimat) and more traditional forms of government that are the residue of past Sultanic regimes. The latter are backdated to at least the Umayyad Age and are characterized by the autocratic leadership of the Sultan who holds a monopoly over state revenues and whose private interests reign supreme over public interests. In this state model, masses and state functionaries are not considered a citizenry but an extension of the Sultanic property, or at best, a means of furthering the Sultan's influence. It combines elements of pre - Islamic Asian regimes (mainly Byzantine and Persian empires) with the religious element of *Al - Imama* (spiritual leadership) whereby the Sultan is presumably the *Imam* (the leader of believers). For Laroui most political entities that the Arab world has witnessed since the Umayyad Age were consistent with this model: They were tyrannical, implicitly secular, yet overtly religious Sultanic monarchies that paid lip service to Shari'ah and did not quite differ from the pre - Islamic states (2011b).

What can we make, then, of the "Islamic State" which is a common usage in Islamic historiography and the only legitimate and divine form of political rule that Muslims cling to? Laroui posits that, if by the "Islamic State" we mean divine rule, as most jurists (*fuqahā*) would have, this

¹Laroui's remarkable emphasis on the state in the modernization of the Arab societies triggered many accusations of reactionism, statism and conservatism.

form of government simply never materialized or, at best, can be strictly used to denote Islam's early age (the Prophet's era and Rashidun Caliphate) which spanned a few decades and rather remains a short - lived phase in the overall Arab political history. Laroui draws on Ibn Khaldun (1332 - 1406) who systematically showed that, exempting the rather brief period of the Rashidun Caliphate, the predominant form of political rule Muslims witnessed was natural, repressive rule mixed with some aspects of rational policy, as the most suitable rule for rural societies (p.130, 2011b)

Another part of the difficulty pertaining to conceptualizing the state in Islam resides in the scarcity of relevant historical data. In fact, the earliest historical scholarship on the state in Islam dates back to the middle of the 8th century CE, after the rise of the Abbasid rulership. Hence, anything we know about the Prophet's era, the Caliphate and the Umayyad state starts from that date, making accurate description of the state in early Islam an onerous, if not an impossible task (Laroui, 2011b, pp.121 - 22). In that light, the Islamic State is best conceived as a political utopia that obscures the true nature of states across the Islamic history. Only through a realist and historicist approach into the concept of the state as it objectively evolved in the Arab political history, Laroui argues, can we disentangle contemporary Arab political ideology and outline a comprehensive, historically - grounded theory of the Arab state comparable to the realism of Hegelian and Machiavellian political philosophies.

It is also through this collective attachment to the political utopias of the early Islamic age that Laroui explains the contemporary political predicament. The state has ever since been associated in the Arab political imaginary with political alienation and the forsaken divine rule. This estrangement appears more remarkably in the general distrust toward state institutions, including the modern state, but its beginnings can be traced back to the work of Muslim philosophers and jurists. An interesting example is Abu Hamid Al - Ghazali (1058 - 1111) whose work clearly evinces a fundamental despair towards the Caliphate as a viable future possibility and accepts existing oppressive quasi - Islamic states as long as they preserved a modicum of the Shari'ah and tenuously adhered to the Islamic notion of the Ummah. Al - Ghazali's position, Laroui concludes, is the outcome of his utopianism as a jurist colliding with his realism as a historian. It is illustrative of how the fantasies of an ideal Caliphate are shattered by the harsh realities of objective history. The wide reception of Neoplatonic philosophies in the Islamic deliberative sphere after the 15th century CE, an era of large scale regression in the Islamic world, also speaks volumes to the role of utopia in times of historical stagnancy and cultural decline (2011b).

Political utopia and the antipathy it breeds towards the secular state are exacerbated by the failure of Arab states to produce what Laroui calls an overriding "state ideology" around which a substantive national consensus can be fleshed out. It is against this backdrop that the persistence of traditional social structures and the proliferation of vertical social divisions can be fathomed. In light of the popular distrust towards state institutions, popular allegiance shifts elsewhere, along the more familiar lines of kin, sect, tribe

and ethnicity. Identity politics is thereof an adaptation and collective self - fashioning strategy by alienated groups desperately longing for a so - called utopian Islamic past. The utopian attachment to early Islam has impeded an objective engagement with the state as it exists. The state is presented here as antithetical to morality which exclusively resides in the Islamic state, in the utopia. The emphasis on individual responsibility to immunize oneself (through group allegiance) against the encroachments of the secular state while awaiting the improbable utopian state pits the Islamic political thought against Hegelian and Michiavellian political realism that adjourns utopian society to the end of the historical dialectic and views the state as an ongoing process and the only scope of political possibility. It is in this Hegelian conception of the state where the perceived contradictions of the state in Islam can be resolved. Any understanding of the state should come to grips with the evil and good duality of human nature, meaning that all human institutions will at a given moment be subject to will and whim, vice and virtue.

Liberty in the Arab political imaginary

What is the meaning of liberty that can be gleaned from this utopian view of the state? In Hegel's political theory the state is both a means and an end, a continuously evolving entity, always open to contestation and enhancement. Until the good - evil dialectic is resolved in the absolute the state is the only locus of political possibility. In the Islamic paradigm, however, the state is locked into an almost a historical opposition with virtue and divine will; it is the source of all evil, and only beyond it or in its demise can virtue, liberty, and individual happiness be conceived. In the Arab political imaginary liberty is conceivable only under divine rule, beyond the secular state, outside the realm of objective relations in history: in the utopia.

Until the caliphate becomes a reality again, liberty is to be sought within tribal enclaves and the primitive zones of kinship which, until recently, were beyond the gaze the Sultanate state which now, by means of modern state apparatuses, can extend its power to rural hinterlands which for long escaped the Sultan's influence (Laroui, 2012). Since the secular state which the collective political imaginary collapses to the expression of Sultanate hegemony and a vehicle for advancing the ruler's interests, political subjects resort to alternative, pre - state forms of allegiance, mainly kin, tribe and ethnicity. In the urban sphere where colonial bureaucracy bolstered the Sultan's control, the meaning of liberty is sought elsewhere: in the inner convolutions of the self, in the mystical trance. No wonder Sufism as a leading social movement in Islamic history gained currency in this particular juncture and is mostly associated with urban Islam (Laroui, 2011b).

Historicizing Arabs

In the colonial era Arab societies underwent a series of changes that significantly altered social and political structures. Major colonial powers tapped into recurrent popular upheavals against traditional sultanates (e. g. the 'Urabi Revolt in Egypt) to vindicate colonial intervention as an intermediary between the Sultanate state and the revolting masses. The series of liberal reforms that Arab states underwent under the colonial rule, such as bureaucratization,

land reform, formal education, and industrialization, put significant limits on the Sultanates and created a more dynamic political scene where popular masses could exert political influence. However, public reception of the colonial reforms eschewed their modernizing impact and zeroed down on the secular constitutions and the subordinate position to which the Islamic law was relegated in the new colonial order. Rather than modernize the cultural and cognitive structures of colonized society, these reforms only deepened the existing political alienation (2011a).

As an ideological critic, Larouilays Arabs' failure to tap into the achievements of liberalism and Western modernity at large at the feet of the Arab cultural elites whose stance towards the West he argues is preposterously ambivalent. Arab intellectuals entertain an image of the West that simultaneously lauds its civilizational wonders (as evident in the Arab Renaissance leaders such as Mohamed Abduh and Sayyid Qutb who marveled at the Europe's modern architecture, transportation, and infrastructure) and derides the "excesses" of Western culture, seen as materialistic and bereft of spirituality typical of Islamic societies. A more recent illustration of this reductive juxtaposition involves the work of Palestinian - American neo - Orientalist Wael Hallaq who starts from a narrow definition of morality (equated with Islam) to dismiss Western modernity. His euphoric proclamation that Arabs' attempts to emulate (morally corrupt) Western democratic traditions would inevitably usher in a failed state—or what he calls the "Impossible State" (2013).

The contradiction between Islam's moral superiority and its historical backwardness is resolved in the Arab psyche, mainly in ideology of the sheikh but also in liberal and technocratic elite, as the corollary of Muslims' distance from the true teachings of Islam. According this view, Muslim' renaissance is contingent on the application of their faith and restoring sharia to the state. For Laroui, this reductionist and univariate analysis of the Islamic predicament does little to redress the Arab condition and merely paints a reverse ideological picture of reality; hence, his emphasis on ideological critique as a preliminary step in the project of Arab modernity. This moralizing condescending view that purges the West of any moral value is a process facilitated by what Laroui views as a hasty confusion that confounds the early modern West with the late colonial West. To adequately comprehend the West as a cultural entity, one needs to delve into its philosophical origins of reason, historicism and objectivism which predate colonial expansion.

Arab elites' disposition to deride liberalism and their failure to interiorize its founding principles, even as they virtually revel in its bounties, greatly explains why liberal reforms only left intact, instead of disrupt, traditional social structures. For instance, in the emergent public service and employment sector which were the target of colonial bureaucratic reforms aimed at rationalizing those realms, access to resources and opportunities operated along traditional lines of kin, ethnicity and sect. Similarly, instead of increasing popular leverage and political participation, modern state institutions were geared towards advancing Sultanate interests (e. g., the army in service of the sultan;

public administration as a tool for managing Sultanic property) (2011b).

Also noteworthy is how, in the Arab urban space, aspects of peasant and rural culture concur problematically with modern architecture, leading to what Laroui calls the “folklorization” of the emergent class - based society. Contrary to received wisdom, folklore is not the expression of a unique Arab rural culture that the state valorizes (e. g., in tourism and performance arts), but evidence of a gestational social phase in which a nascent bourgeois class looks fondly at its eroding, decadent past represented by the primitive aspects of the folklore. To revive and valorize folklore is to reinforce traditionalism and conceal social change (2011a). This revived interest in archaic cultural forms derives much of its rationale from Orientalist scholarship, mainly the Anglo - American version, which successfully lulled Arab intellectual elites into believing in their cultural superiority and reinforced their sense of cultural authenticity. Orientalists’ putative interest in the Arab folklore, *Tahqeeq* (text verification), and the translation of classical Arab texts is interpreted as evidence of Islam’s global appeal, cements Arabs’ sense of cultural particularity, while obscuring the historical entanglements and commonalities that binds Islam with West.² Orientalists’ ostensible fascination with *our past* only hides their contempt for *our present*. By romanticizing Arab folklore, orientalists do not confer value on those hackneyed popular forms as Arab intellectuals are quick to believe. Rather, by gazing at our acrobats, sorcerers, snake charmers, orientalists (just like other western tourist who “relish” our space) are allowed to fondly see an image of their primitive agrarian past which was eroded in the process of Europe’s transition into modernity. In other words, *our* folklore offers a mirror glass for the contemptuous, condescending Westerner into *his* own primitive past (Laroui, 2011a).

Another way in which orientalism has helped construct a delusional vision of Arab reality and perpetuate existing reactionary ideology involves its eclectic use of social science tools that tilt more towards descriptive anthropology than predictive sociological paradigms such as those applied in historicism and Marxism. Thus, Laroui’s *Al - Arab wa Al - fikr a - ttarikhi* [Arabs and the Historical Thought] (1998) lodges a vehement criticism of orientalist and neo - orientalist scholarship’s opposition to historicism which dismiss it on grounds of charting a uniform trajectory of global history modelled on European periodization metrics. Orientalism’s endorsement of postmodern relativism has been pushed too far to see nothing but warring essences and hover over the unity of the human condition that cuts across ideological divisions. To assume third world histories are subject to distinct, peculiar temporalities one will need to account for why non - European histories have evolved along similar patterns. Periodizing history, Laroui seems to suggest, is not a subjective choice of the historian, but the objective dictate of history as it unfolds. A case in point is industrialization which, beginning in the 19th century

²For a somehow similar critique lodged against the Subaltern Studies Group’s reproduction of Orientalism’s West-East divide, see Vivek Chibber (2013). *Postcolonial theory and the specter of capital*. London: Verso.

Europe, irresistibly spread across the non - Western world, inevitably signaling an “industrial era” in those respective contexts (2011a). Once industrialization and the attendant process of urbanization impact a given society and the social relations are transformed in the process, one might safely speak of a new industrial age. To conjure up an alternative appellation to describe what is a virtually a familiar universal process only obscures historical reality and perpetuates ideological delusion.

2. Conclusion

The Arab intellectuals whose work I reviewed in this paper all attempt to answer a deep baffling question: why have the Arab post - colonial states failed over the course of decades to produce genuinely modern civic and secular societies comparable to Western liberal democracies? In response to that question they all seem to converge on one point: the centrality of the identity question in the predicament of the failed Arab nation - state. The identity question remains a refrain in the Arab scholarship which reproduces the same essentialisms and social divisions it purportedly seeks to obliterate. Embracing sectarian, ethnic and tribal differentiations creates warring compartmentalized identities, perpetuates social traditionalism, and renders the project of a modern Arab nation - states all the more tenuous. In the absence of a unifying state - centered, citizenship - oriented principle, the natural condition of a society is war, not peace.

This paper has sought to document some aspects of social fragmentation in the Arab world while dissecting how those forces of social division are reproduced and rationalized in a refined academic language of essentialism influenced by orientalist and objectivist anthropological scholarship. More importantly it has sought to differentiate essentialisms that articulate identities strategically formed around legitimate demands, such as demands of groups excluded from citizenship, from more pernicious and destructive ideological essentialisms aimed at bifurcating and tribalizing society. The latter form, it can be concluded, is particularly evident in the Arab world where playing identity politics has reinforced traditionalism and perpetuated the predicament the nation - state.

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