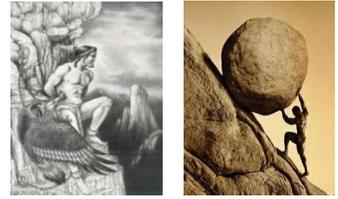


The Arab Nahda and modernity: subversion or reform?

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a Promethean or Sisyphian endeavor?

General historical context. The nineteenth-century witnessed the accelerated processes of modernization in its distinct political economic project: increased industrialization, mass production and circulation of commodities, unification of monetary values, the increase of trade, as well as the beginning of transformation of political systems into national entities. World over, empires collapsed (the Spanish, French, Holy Roman, Chinese, and Ottoman) while others gained power (the British, Russian, German, and American). Through colonization ‘Europe’ was constructed as the representative notion and guardian of modernity and modern power. In the shadow of the specter of Europe, Muslim, Indian, Ottoman, Arab and other intellectuals formulated their own recipes for the progress of their societies.

The Ottoman Tanzimat or reforms. With the end of the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire entered into the world market through its trade and monetary relations with Western Europe. The Empire underwent serious changes at the time and introduced a series of liberal economic reforms called the *Tanzimat*. By 1863 the Imperial Ottoman Bank had been established to regulate interest-bearing paper money, which was funded largely by external loans from Great Britain. The Crimean War over-shadowed the various riots and uprisings that took place in the Empire in Aleppo, Mount Lebanon, Greece, and the Balkans. The ruptures of violence and sectarianism around the Empire were symptoms of the beginning breakdown of the Imperial order under the effect of modernization reforms that further integrated the Empire into the rapidly expanding world market.

Anti-colonial, nationalist and pan-Islamist ideas proliferate amongst the various communities. The increasing colonial presence of European nations in South Asia (British in India) and the Middle East (Napoleon’s Campaign on Egypt 1798), as well as the slow disintegration of the Ottoman Empire led local intellectuals to seek their own formulas for progress. The same progress and achievement of Western civilization was simultaneously viewed by them as a threat as well as a coveted attribute. Thus many intellectuals sought to discover the ‘secrets’ of European Western Civilization and to defend what they gradually came to define as “Arab” and “Islamic” culture, tradition, or at times nature.

Proliferation of printed texts, journals, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and essays calling for: reform and progress as well resistance to colonization. Afghani and Tahtawi’s texts are but one example of the output of the time and they demonstrate the unfolding of strictly modernist ideologies concerning society and power over the course of the nineteenth-century.

Responses to Western imperialism. The redefinition of concepts such as religion (*din*), culture (‘*aada, adab*), society (*al-hay’a al-ijtima’iya*) history (*tarikh*), progress (*taqaddum*), and civilization (*tamaddun*) was a task undertaken by intellectuals like Afghani, Butrus al-Bustani, Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, Ibrahim al-Yaziji and countless others. These intellectuals formulated a distinct historical consciousness in which the corruption of the Arabs or Arab-Islamic nation was perceived as an ever-present threat. The only safeguard that emerged from this experience of a crisis in temporality as well as a crisis in historical consciousness was the idea of the Nation, *al-watan*, as a refuge from the vagrancies of time.

Afghani as a case study. Sayyid Jamal al-Din al- Afghani (1838-1897) was a committed anti-colonial nationalist and reformer. Afghani's positions on religion were in many ways conducive to the secularist projects of reform within the Empire in the nineteenth-century. He offered a distinct perception of science as based on philosophical thinking, *falsafa* and *hikma*: with the guidance of philosophy reason brings around scientific inquiry into the nature of things. He formulated a theory of knowledge in order to argue that Islam is in no way incompatible with scientific inquiry. Moreover, he responded affirmatively to the question: is the reform of Islamic, Arab, or Indian communities possible and how? In his Lecture on Teaching and Learning, Afghani argued that education based on *hikma* is what makes successful reform possible. Ultimately, he was preoccupied with the sources of true progress in society and the possibilities of religious reform.

Central Tenants of Nahda. The writing of national history is undertaken as well as the history of Arab and Islamic 'culture'. Language was seen as the mirror of the nation or *watan* and the binding force of its people. Encyclopedias, dictionaries, lexicons, and pedagogic books were written and published at this time as well as a significant increase in re-prints of classical sources. There was a rise of philological and Orientalist approaches to the study of Arabic and Islamic sources as well as a significant translation movement from and into Arabic. Culture or 'aada came to be discussed as a comparative subject as well as religion. Ultimately, progress as a liberal value was translated into 'native' terms and Western science was celebrated as the tool of progress. The economic aspects of social inequality instilled by modernity often went unanalyzed and the discussion of regression and progress was largely undertaken in cultural historicist terms. The nineteenth-century came to signify: a rupture, a break with a past that had become increasingly distant, and a signpost of non-European's struggle to catch up with the train of progress as it sped into the future.

Concluding Questions:

- Is the future that Nahda thinkers predicted our present?
- Do the Nahda thinkers develop a theory of modernity that is coherent?
- Is the idea of a Muslim or Arab Modernity apologetic in nature? How can the critiques of modernity be re-formulated in the present?
- After reading non-European sources, what are the links that you can establish between modernity, colonialism, and enlightenment?

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