Pensée 3: The Modernity of the Arabs

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The study of Arab nationalism, and indeed of all nationalisms, is beset with particular problems. One is the imprecision of the main concepts involved, starting with the definition of nation. Another is the confusion, inherent in the very word "nationalism," between two quite different objects of study—nationalism *as a movement*, as a social and political force, and nationalism *as an ideology*. The first allows objective, historical analyses of how a particular movement arose and developed in such and such a country, of the social groups that supported and/or opposed it, and, not least, of how states have sought to define and utilize it. The second is an aspiration, an ideological and normative claim, one with a strong tendency to control public debate; it has an inherent tendency to distort the history of the supposed "nation." The special claims nationalists make for their particular nation cause a third problem: although modern history has yielded hundreds of cases of nationalism, as movement and ideology, nationalism occasions analysis that is singular, treating the nation in question as unique and avoiding comparison.

This pervasive difficulty with the study of nationalism has in recent decades begun to achieve some resolution, even if virtually all nationalists (i.e., 99% of humanity at least) reject the resolutions offered. In sociology and related disciplines, there has been an explosion of theoretical and comparative work. Writers such as Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Anthony Smith, Craig Calhoun, and Eric Hobsbawm have established the terms of an analytic debate on the character of nationalist movements and on the reasons for the emergence of ideologies associated with them around the world. In summary, this debate takes place within a spectrum of views ranging from those who, as is the case with nationalists, adhere to the "primordialist" or "atavistic" origin of nations and those who adopt a "modernist" position and see nationalism as a product of the social and political revolutions of approximately two centuries ago. Although the former approach, in stronger or milder forms, can be reconciled with the claim of virtually all nationalisms to antiquity and ancient historic and cultural roots, the "modernist" approach collides with what nationalists proclaim. It rejects explanations and claims to legitimacy in terms of history, tradition, religion, and other conventional atavistic categories; it refutes claims that nations are basically different and, treating them as ideological constructs, analyzes them as broadly similar. The modernist approach also admits, through an appeal to supranationalist normative concepts (e.g., international law), a critique of claims to moral supremacy or moral exceptionalism that nationalists often espouse.

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At the same time as this debate has expanded on the character of nationalism, a parallel modernist reformulation of the concept of "identity" has been developed, most prominently by Amartya Sen. Rejecting the monolithic, closed, and supposedly determinant character of "identity," Sen argues that identities are multiple, that they borrow from and exchange elements with others, and that human beings, far from treating identity as destiny, are free to interpret and reinterpret their identities in a creative and open way.

All of this should fall like a cascade of cold, if long overdue, water onto the often heated and partisan debates on Middle Eastern, and not least Arab, nationalism. Virtually all literature on Arab-world nationalism, whether partisan or academic, treats it as unique or at least very different. Yet many, if not all, of the major features attributed to its modern history can be found elsewhere—ditto Israeli, Turkish, and Iranian nationalism. The supposed "failure" of the Arabs to unite as one state is not really that different from that of other postcolonial continents that aspired to, or once enjoyed, unity—Latin America, Africa, and South Asia. The reason is very simple: when distinct state and economic interests are established, it is very difficult to merge them. This is also the case with the European Union. Instead of asking why the Arabs "failed" to unite, it would be more appropriate to ask why they should.

In a similar vein, the apparent "inconsistency" of identity in the Arab world—between Pan-Arab *(qawmī)* and state-specific (*quṭrī, waṭanī)* identification and the slipping of Arab states and politicians back and forth between them—is explicable within a Sen-like conception of multiple identities. This is something that should come as no surprise to anyone who is American (with the variations of, as it were, "Pan-American" and hyphenated "-American" identities). It is similar to the espousal of Englishness and Britishness by most inhabitants of the United Kingdom, not to mention the slippages between Turkish, Turkic, and Ottoman identities. The supposed addiction of the Arabs to utopian projects, to "dreams" and illusions about nationalism for which recent writers so complacently castigate them, can be found in many other countries in the world—for example, Serbia.

Above all, a brisk and ideologically unflinching application of modernist theory to the Middle East serves to undercut the claims to ancient origins, God-given particularity, cultural superiority, and general nationalist propaganda that beset all the peoples of the region—Arabs and Israelis, Turks and Iranians, and Kurds and Armenians alike. Some regional states can indeed claim centuries of existence as distinct institutional entities: Iran, Turkey, Oman, Yemen, Egypt, and Morocco. However, the state systems now ruling these are all modern creations, to an almost complete extent products of the post World War I settlement and the international pressures affecting the region. The political communities they claim to represent, "nations," are even more so. A modernist approach also injects some skepticism into the recent debate on the "failure" of Arab nationalism. The feeling of belonging to an Arab political and cultural community is probably just as strong now as it was decades ago; with modern

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communications and many an unresolved regional conflict, this feeling is likely to continue.

As for claims, bloodily and tenaciously proclaimed, to one or another piece of territory on the grounds of historic primacy or divine allocation, these should be questioned and practical, reasonable solutions adopted. That this is most unlikely to happen—in Palestine or Kurdistan or Nagorno-Karabagh or Kashmir—only underlines the immense and pernicious influence of the traditional "atavistic" conception of nationalism.

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