Editorial

Intellectuals, Islam and Modernity

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All too often, the study of ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslims’ resembles stamp collecting, carrying the danger of putting together pieces of information without consideration of the broader context. Associated with this perceived and constructed ‘singular community’ is the idea that Muslims form a cultural unity, based upon a common cultural core that only the Orientalist is equipped to decipher. Furthermore, the ‘debate’ on ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslims’ is overshadowed by false binaries and a very narrow optic of modernization dichotomies: modern vs. traditional, Islam vs. West, and secular vs. religious fundamentalism. Such binaries suppress the diversity of histories, cultures, struggles and aspirations, and conceal the real ‘divides’ in the Islamic world.

The intention of this issue of MEJCC is to challenge the provincialism of the perceived ‘universal’ theory of culture and identity, drawing attention to the multivalent and multi-local characteristics of cultures in the Islamic world, highlighting the necessity, once again, of taking the needs and possibilities beyond the false binaries, of speaking with a ‘third voice’, and of recognizing the polyphonic and diverse character of the ‘Muslim Other’. A major concern of this issue is to document and critically analyze the contemporary intellectual discourse emerging about ‘Islam’ and the ‘Muslims’ from both Muslim and Western scholars. The reasons for engaging with these questions around modernity and intellectuals are varied. Understanding the nature of the ‘modern’ and ‘modernity’ has been, and still is, a key and central focus of much that has been written about the Muslim world. At the heart of the debate about the development of modernity lies the significant question of division of labor and, in particular, about the way our sense of the ‘modern’ and ‘material
realities’, have been articulated and mediated by a specific group of people whom we have come to know as intellectuals. The role that this specific group plays, from one country to the next, one region to another, one generation to the other, is constantly shifting. How this specific group is defined, how it relates to other social groups, and its validity for all communities and contexts, remain relevant, yet under-examined questions. How have contemporary intellectuals, thinkers and artists in the Middle East responded to modernity? How important are their writings, works of art and ways of thinking in re-articulating the notions of ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ in the region? Does the re-centering of the debate on ‘culture’ and ‘modernity’ around a Western episteme provide an adequate way of engaging with the question of ‘global modernity’? These are among the questions and issues with which this issue of MEJCC attempts to engage. The articles gathered here open the way for discussion of some of the general concerns around the topic of intellectuals and intellectual production in the Middle East. The debates they raise are symptomatic of a rich and highly contested area of research. What they have in common is the realization or the wisdom that intellectual life and civil society in the Middle East are, contrary to facile analyses of the region, fluid, self-reflexive, heterogeneous and highly nuanced. Carool Kersten’s opening article, ‘From Braudel to Derrida: Mohammed Arkoun’s Rethinking of Islam and Religion’ provides a rare and critical exposé on the late Mohammed Arkoun’s philosophical thought. He provides a detailed account of the key intellectual encounters that shaped his thinking, including the French Annales School and the anthropologies of Freire, Bastide and Balandier. He also shows how Arkoun’s approach to the study of scripture draws on the literary criticism of Frye, structuralist linguistics, Ricoeur’s phenomenological hermeneutics, anthropology and semiotics. Kersten explains how Arkoun’s thought challenges existing modes of religious, philosophical and scientific-tele-technological reason. Arkoun’s key contribution to philosophy, namely his meta-modernist project of ‘Emerging reason’ is articulated ‘as an alternative “posture” of thinking in which binaries such as Islam vs ‘the West’, religiosity vs. secularity, and tradition vs. modernity collapse’. Atef Alshaer’s contribution focuses on a different type of intellectual—the intellectual as a poet. He traces key moments in the development of Mahmoud Darwish, the renowned Palestinian poet and intellectual. Through his analysis of ‘The Dice Player’, a poem by Darwish, Alshaer manages to distill a whole Darwishian world; populated with images of existence, resistance and creativity. It shows the different ways in which Darwish’s poetry has contributed to the construction of Palestinian identity. Darwish’s poem is used here as an example of a ‘summa cum laude’ in Arabic poetry’, and ‘embodies emblems of intellectual maturity and identity that