

Review Essay. Adonis: Towards a New Arab Culture

Author(s): Issa J. Boullata

Source: *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Feb., 1988), pp. 109-112

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/163588>

Accessed: 27-02-2019 10:19 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *International Journal of Middle East Studies*

**Issa J. Boullata**

## REVIEW ESSAY

### ADONIS: TOWARDS A NEW ARAB CULTURE

“Different culture can begin only by a criticism of the heritage in a radical and comprehensive way, for we cannot build a new culture if we do not critically shake the structures of the old culture. Without that, the new culture will [merely] be a layer that accumulates on the layers of the old culture so that these latter will [eventually] absorb it, and it will have no effectiveness.”<sup>1</sup>

These words of Adonis (ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd) were written in 1979. If anything, they are more—not less—revolutionary than his other writings of the previous thirty years or so. By the time he wrote them, he had become known as one of the most prominent Arab intellectuals who were most critical of Arab life and culture. Questions have been raised about his loyalty to the Arabs and about the risky degree of change he was advocating that would, in his opponents’ view, obliterate the historic Arab identity. This review essay will attempt to analyze Adonis’s critique of the prevailing Arab culture and will present his vision of a new Arab culture, meant to be more consonant with modernity and truer to what he considers to be the living values of the Arab heritage.

To start with, the Arab heritage for Adonis is not merely what has been accepted by the prevailing Arab culture to be such. For the prevailing view of the heritage is one-dimensional and preserves only static values, most of which are not useful or functional in modern times. For him, there are more dynamic elements of the Arab heritage that should be stressed in modern times and used to inform modern Arab life and to inspire progress. According to him, these dynamic elements have been submerged by the tradition-bound mentality of the intellectual elites for many centuries with the passive acquiescence of the Arab masses. The group for them has always been preferred to the individual, and the safety of the tried status quo has invariably been preferred to the risk of change and creativity. Innovators were therefore quashed for the sake of continuity and self-preservation in the Arab experience of historical development over many centuries.<sup>2</sup> This has eventually led to the ossification of Arab institutions and their dysfunction in modern times in which change and creativity are of the essence.

Looking at the Arab world today, Adonis sees that the regimes labelled “traditionalist” share the same culture with those labelled “progressive.” There may be minor differences in appearances and in forms, but their essence remains virtually the same. The state in all of them monopolizes what it considers to be correct information, and the use and control of modern mass media of communications has tremendously increased this monopoly. The old tribal principle of supporting one’s brother, right or wrong, has been extended to the modern state in the Arab world and all citizens are expected to support their state whether right or wrong. In fact, it cannot be conceived to be wrong for it is always right. Therefore, any criticism of any Arab regime by its citizens is considered by authorities to be highly disloyal. All behavior that disagrees with the regime is considered to be a

subversive deviation. Thought is politicized and intellectuals are either coopted by the regime or else silenced by force or the fear of force. When they speak or write, they do so as mere employees of the state or as self-appointed spokesmen for it and its culture, as mouthpieces defending and justifying its policies and actions, performing very much the same function of the tribal poets of the past. Whether a kingdom, an emirate, or a republic, the state expects loyalty expressed in the form of obedience. Its opponents run the risk of defamation, loss of job and of economic security, persecution, imprisonment and even exile, if not physical liquidation, depending on the degree of their opposition and the methods of the regime.

Whether a regime upholds a traditional ideology or a progressive ideology, it acts as if ideology is more important than people. That is so because the regime's purpose is to perpetuate itself and preserve the status quo of the social and economic order. Adonis notes that priority is given to economic development in Arab regimes but that this development leads nowhere: It is limited to certain quantitative growth in particular sectors or classes, but there is no general growth in the material and the nonmaterial well-being of the people. And thus wealth increases but poverty does not decrease—it rather increases. Adonis recognizes the importance of the economic sphere but objects to its being given priority. He observes that politics is necessarily tied to this economic order, and he notes that its purpose is to propagate ideological uniformity and to cover up exploitation. All Arab regimes are viewed as repressive and coercive, their aim being to impose uniformity, quash difference and diversity, and keep the status quo. Man to them is a thing to be manipulated, he is not an end in himself.

When Adonis examines the content of Arab ideologies, he sees them as constructs that do not relate to reality. For him, they are mere projections of desires, dreams, and hopes. To this extent, they are illusions. They do not pose questions for discussion, they offer answers to be believed as doctrines. Those of them that look to past values and institutions as models romanticize the past and then lock themselves up in it. Those that oppose them are no less doctrinaire and equally lock themselves up in tight intellectual constructs. Thus ideologies in the Arab world are means of enslavement, not of liberation. In Arab countries where political parties are permitted to convey ideologies, parties act like tribes ensuring internal loyalty to themselves whether they are in power or in opposition. Their aim is to control, not to free; their purpose is to be in power, not to lead society to progress.

It is clear from this that Adonis has a jaundiced view of the change that has been introduced in the Arab world, especially since 1952. Those upheavals in political and social structures that have been called "revolution" in one Arab country or another are, for him, mere restless fidgety moves toward revolution. The change they introduced was not real, it was superficial: They may have changed political forms but not political aims, they may have changed economic formations but not economic purposes. They failed to change the quality of Arab life, they failed to introduce modernity in Arab thought and behavior, they failed to establish new values, new attitudes, and new institutions. They failed to create the new Arab by changing his inner being.

Adonis contends that, after the demise of Ottoman hegemony and Western colonial rule, the Arabs have established political regimes but they have not instituted what he calls civic society. He believes that such regimes, not based on civic institutions and relations, are systems of total submission at all levels, intellectual as well as physical.

Genuine loyalties continue to be very narrow in Arab society. If they transcend one's immediate family, they may be loyalties to the tribe or what stands for a tribe, such as a religious group or sect. In certain cases, political formations attract some loyalty, often because they are reinforced by religious or sectarian loyalties, by tribal, family, and

personal relations, but seldom on account of ideas and programs only. A political regime is therefore kept together by governmental coercion and mass submission, not by civic loyalty. It has thus to dominate all information and teaching media in order to instill and propagate a sense of legitimacy, while its coercive power commands obedience.

In view of all this, Adonis believes that the Arab intellectual elites must reject the prevailing Arab culture. Because the Arab masses are inarticulate, the elite must rise up to the occasion. They must criticize the prevailing Arab culture radically and decisively. They must not permit themselves to be used by the regimes, and must not develop attitudes of reconciliation with the old culture. For him, all complaisance and all efforts at avoiding confrontation are a disservice to Arab society and the ideals of modernity, because they perpetuate the old culture and play into the hands of its time-honored methods of absorbing change and killing innovation. Arab intellectuals must stress difference and dissimilarities. It is not that they ought to be *engagé* as Sartre would say, or organic as Gramsci would believe. It is that they must be radical and singular, for it is here, in creative freedom, that true culture is, according to Adonis.

Freedom for Adonis is the most essential value in the new Arab culture to be developed. For him it is equivalent to revolution, to creativity, to modernity itself. Modernity is seen as a continuous and endless struggle to transcend oneself, to go beyond the accepted and known world, therefore to revolt against prevailing conditions and practices in order to destroy them and create new and better ones. Modernity without freedom is a contradiction in terms, and creativity without freedom is an impossible proposition. Freedom is therefore essential for any change in Arab culture.

Adonis does not restrict freedom to the political sphere. Political behavior is only one aspect of human behavior and culture, important as it is in the present Arab context. All human behavior must become free. Arabs must be free to question, free to criticize, free to create and initiate. Nothing should be beyond question and criticism: authority, tradition, customs, ethics, literary conventions, religious values, political ideologies, the whole culture. Man must be more important than theories and ideologies, and he must be permitted to grow to the utmost of his potential. Wherever there is coercion, freedom must be nurtured: in the family, at school, in the university, and in all other institutions of Arab society. Arab institutions will be recreated, reshaped, reoriented when they are based on freedom, not coercion. A new Arab life will emerge with new values and new institutions. A new Arab culture will develop, but it should never be permitted to atrophy by relenting or by abandoning the process of continuous change. Thought and action must go hand in hand, experience must direct and guide theory and ideology. Reality must be the criterion and the touchstone, not a romanticized image of the past, or an idealized hope of the future, or a static value system. Arab culture must be ready to change, to grow, to move with the continuously developing perception of reality. As related to nature, this perception of reality must be constantly reviewed, improved, and deepened with every advance in science so that nature may be better controlled and used. As related to society, this perception of reality must be constantly examined and critically studied so that it may be able to revise the value system, create new institutions, and develop new ideas that can serve society better in the light of new conditions.

As for the cultural heritage that has given the Arabs their historic specificity and identity, Adonis believes it is wrong to think of it as an undifferentiated, unchanging whole. It is true that the static elements of continuity in it have usually dominated the dynamic elements of change so that conservatism and traditionalism now appear to many people as its main features. But Adonis strongly believes that those dynamic elements are nonetheless part of the Arab heritage and must be sought by modern Arabs who aspire to keep their historic specificity and identity. But he cautions against mere imitation of past models, even when dynamic elements are singled out in the cultural heritage. For ex-

ample, according to him it is not Ṣūfī thought and institutions of the past that must be recreated in modern times but rather Ṣūfī attitudes of self-improvement and transformation, the burning Ṣūfī desire to search for truth, the Ṣūfī abnegation of material and societal trappings, and the Ṣūfī affirmation of freedom and of the wholeness of being. It is not the Bāṭinī esoteric knowledge and organizations of the past that must be recaptured in modern times, but rather the Bāṭinī stress on the value of inner life and the Bāṭinī search for meaning behind appearances. It is not the Qarmaṭī revolt of the past that must be emulated in modern times, but rather the Qarmaṭī drive for equality and justice in society. And so on.

According to Adonis, only those values of the past cultural heritage that illumine the present and the future should be preserved inasmuch as they help the Arabs not only to keep their identity and specificity but also to pass on the experience of modern life successfully and build a better future. It is the existential aspect of the Arab cultural heritage as a forward, progressive force that is emphasized by Adonis, not simply its historical aspect as a past achievement.

Adonis also wants the new Arab culture to be open to other cultures of the human race. The experiences of other nations in the history of mankind may have much to offer to the Arabs. But again he warns against mere imitation; for imitation leads to loss of identity and ends in the death of creativity and originality. Whether Arabs choose to adopt Western science and technology, democracy, socialism, rationalism, or other achievements of the human race, he believes they must intelligently assimilate what they adopt, and creatively adapt it to their own culture before it can be really useful and functional. The important thing is that they should continue to participate in the civilization of mankind by being authentically and freely themselves and by being continuously and freely creative. That is how they were able to contribute to civilization in the past, and that is how they will in the future.

INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC STUDIES  
MCGILL UNIVERSITY

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Adonis (ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd), *Fātiḥa li-nihāyāt al-qarn: bayānāt min ajl thaqāfa ʿarabiyya jadīda* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwda, 1980), p. 225. This book of collected essays and some interviews constitutes the major source of this review essay.

<sup>2</sup>Adonis has elaborated this argument in his three-volume book, *al-Thābit wa'l-mutaḥawwil: baḥṭh fī'l-ittibāʿ wa'l-ibdāʿ ʿind al-ʿArab* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwda, 1974–1978). Aspects of this argument appeared in an earlier book of his, *Zaman al-shiʿr* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwda, 1972).