Book Review

The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State

By Halim Barakat. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 348 pp.

This book has an ambitious and comprehensive goal: to analyze the degenerate contemporary condition of the Arab nation and then

present a "theory of action," a vision to transcend the current state of decline and continue the process of *nahḍah*. Barakat's proposed approach to the analysis of Arab society is one that he characterizes as dynamic (treating society as changing rather than static), dialectical (emphasizing social contradictions and class struggle), and critical (aimed at transforming the status quo). He treats the Arab world as a single unit rather than as a number of nation-states. The emphasis on society rather than political entity does not negate his cognizance that the Arab world has the potential for both unity and divisiveness. Barakat arranges his analysis into three sections: Arab identity and issues of diversity and integration, social structures and institutions (i.e., family, social classes, religion, and Arab politics), and the dynamics of Arab culture.

In his diagnosis of the Arab world's maladies, Barakat offers interesting and useful insights. In making room for these insights, he blasts orientalist discourse for its "static and mosaic" portrait of the Arab world and presents a more cogent analysis of Arab reality. In fact, most orientalists do not acknowledge the existence of the Arab world, but speak rather of a "Middle East" that contains a dizzying array of religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups. They characterize the Arab part of this region as hopelessly divided, culturally inferior, and unable to modernize. Barakat points out that orientalists contradict themselves when they speak of both the divided nature of Arab society and the existence of an "Arab mind" or mentality. Moreover, most orientalist "scholarship" explains resistance to change among Arabs in terms of cultural attitudes, thereby ignoring the prevailing relationship of dependency and the socioeconomic and political contexts of this resistance. Such assertions "reveal the animosity toward Arabs (and especially toward Muslims) that underlies many scholarly pretensions" (p. 22). Barakat cleverly exposes the agenda behind such scholarship: the justification of Israel's existence and the preservation of the status quo under Zionist and western hegemony.

While Barakat is very critical of the orientalist obsession with stasis and division in the Arab world, he does not overlook the internal contradictions of Arab society. Arab society has been in a transitional and dynamic state, "pulled constantly between opposite poles: past versus future, East versus West, tradition versus modernity; sacred versus secular, ethnicity versus class solidarity, unity versus fragmentation, and so on" (p. 12). Barakat is aware of the major obstacles that render Arab society nearly dysfunctional: fragmentation, dependency, underdevelopment, disparities, authoritarianism, alienation, and so on. What differentiates his analysis from that of the orientalists is the focus on the dynamic quality of Arab society, which

includes the potential of success or failure, while orientalists eliminate methodically any possibilities for improvement in the interest of preserving the powers-that-be.

The book's main fallacy is revealed when he offers remedies, or what he calls a "vision," to transcend the bleak outlook. Three possible directions for the future of the Arab world are charted: a continuation of the current dependency and degeneracy, a "traditional" religious vision (as Barakat sees it), and c) the "progressive" vision that he espouses. The first option is obviously discounted by his sharp, well-deserved attack on current regimes and the orientalist scholarship that supports their dependency on the West. That leaves the religious and the progressive visions to battle it out. His own progressive formula for the transformation of Arab society includes five elements, all of which must be adopted or rejected in a package: secularism, democracy, social justice, individual freedom, and unity with diversity. Only these elements, in Barakat's view, will provide the Arab national community with a "progressive and realistic" program that can be used to further the creation of a unified, democratic, egalitarian, and secular Arab nation.

To make a strong case for his vision, Barakat contrasts it with what he calls the traditional religious vision. Here, his first mistake is the inadequate differentiation between Islamist forces and traditionalism or traditional religion. While there has been some overlap between the two, especially in the early decades of the Islamic movement, Islamists distinguish themselves from traditionalists by their reformist agenda and transcendent vision. Rather than simply seeking to preserve or return to local customs or traditional structures of hierarchy, Islamists believe that the Qur'an and the Sunnah provide an independent blueprint for change, one that diverges frequently from a traditionalist notion of what is right. In any case, Barakat lambastes the religious vision as having "an absolutist and medieval frame of reference, without a clear program for solving the complicated problems . . . ." He spends more time disparaging the Islamist alternative than providing a level-headed analysis of it.

While discrediting this alternative, Barakat loosens the scholarly standards that he used to criticize orientalists. For example, he uses second-hand and even third-hand sources: he cites an article by Saad Eddin Ibrahim for quotes from Sayyid Quṭb (p. 302, note 42); he cites a socialist periodical for statements supposedly made by 'Abbās Madanī on Algerian television (p. 312, note 27); and he relies on old research findings and takes Islamist statements out of context. He ends up sounding strangely similar to the anti-Islamist propaganda of Arab regimes, which is characterized by shrill sloganeering and rhetorical

flourishes in place of substantive criticism. In this spirit, he says: "So much for the religious vision, which is more political than spiritual, a reaction rather than a solution, an impasse rather than a way out, and a threat rather than a promise" (p. 281).

Barakat's sweeping dismissal of the Islamist option is the product of a rigidly Marxist notion of religion's functions as well as of his use of the religious vision in a distorted and extremist form. He says that religion can be a mechanism of control, a tool of rebellion, or a means of reconciliation, but sees Islam in the Arab world primarily as a mechanism of control. Barakat believes that religion has ceased to be an integrative force in the Arab world and that, on the contrary, its invocation will lead to more sectarian divisiveness. He sees religion in contemporary Arab society as a source of alienation that renders believers powerless objects rather than positive actors: "Even when they [people] enthusiastically support activist religious movements, the ultimate product of their engagement is impoverishment rather than enrichment, and repression rather than the transformation of reality" (p. 145). Religion's potential for enabling the oppressed to dispute the legitimacy of their oppressors does not excite him, and he does not admit the possibility that the transcendent moral power mobilized by religion has any true transformative quality. When religion is conceptualized in such narrow materialist terms, it is easy to overlook the religious vision as a viable one.

As for Barakat's grasp of the religious alternative, insomuch as his understanding of it exists, it is seriously distorted. In his evaluation of contemporary Islamic movements, he depends on outdated leftist bombast, as in his focus on Islam as the ruling regime's weapon against nationalist and secular forces. As an example, he cites a book by the "official" Saudi Shaykh 'Abd al 'Azīz ibn Bāz, *Naqd al Qawmīyah al 'Arabīyah 'alā Daw' al Islām wa al Wāqi'* (A Critique of Arab Nationalism in Light of Islam and Reality) as "part of an American-Saudi strategy to use Islam as a counter-force against nationalist and progressive forces" (p. 160). If Barakat considers this man to be representative of contemporary Islamic thought, then his knowledge of the religious vision is obviously defective.

In any case, he thinks that Islamists are collaborators with traditional and authoritarian regimes against the left. "The Arab left," he asserts, "is excluded, marginalized, deprived and oppressed. Without exception, the Arab left is routinely exposed to persecution, imprisonment, torture, and assassination in all Arab countries, regardless of the forms of rule" (p. 175). Any observer of human rights violations in the Arab world can verify that replacing "the Arab left" in that sentence with "Islamists" would render the statement equally, if not more

valid, given the current situation in Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt, with the regimes' use of leftists against Islamists.

The "progressive and secular vision" presented by Barakat is not new. In fact, Arab unity, social justice, freedom, and secularism have been the guiding principles of nationalist movements, including the Ba'thists, the Nasserites, and others in the Arab left. The only difference is that "the liberation of Palestine" is dropped and replaced by "democracy." When some of these groups captured power, they not only suppressed the masses in the name of unity, equality, and the liberation of Palestine, but they also failed to achieve any of those goals. Thus these phrases were gradually rendered meaningless. For this reason, Barakat is on the mark in his criticism of the nationalist movements' emphasis on equality, social justice, and the redistribution of wealth at the expense of freedom, human rights, and free elections: "Arab nationalist regimes have been largely responsible for the destruction of civil society in the Arab world" (p. 171).

Moreover, most of the elements in Barakat's progressive program have been part of the Islamist agenda since the beginning. If he had only read the discourses of the Islamists instead of what their opponents say, Barakat would have found that Ḥassan al Bannā developed a cogent analysis Arab of unity; that Sayyid Quṭb, Muṣṭafā Sibā'ī, Muḥammad Mubārak, Ḥassan al Turābī, and others emphatically place social justice on the agenda of political Islam; and the (recent) influential Islamist writings on such issues as gender roles, pluralism, democracy, the Shari'ah's concept of property and fair distribution of wealth, and a variety of issues that are of great concern to the Arab world today. It is no wonder that the banner of nationalism has been absorbed into the agenda of those Islamists who are working from below and reaching, through various social institutions, the lower strata of society, whose grievances have been neglected by the state.

While democracy is a welcome addition to the agenda, Barakat needs to clarify his position, given the contradiction of proposing both secularism and democracy in today's Arab polity. If secularism means making all citizens equal before the law regardless of religious affiliation and gender, as Barakat states, then secularism is compatible with democracy—the freedom of the people to choose collectively leaders and policies—in today's Islamist political context. But if secularism means the total exclusion of religion and the banning from political participation those forces whose ideology is based on Islam, then secularism and democracy are not compatible for the majority of Arabs today. Although Barakat admits that the Arab left is in "utter crisis" and has little remaining popularity, he does not seem to realize that in maligning religion, the left spoke a language that most Arabs

would never speak. Thus, the Arab left has failed to mobilize the masses to implement its agenda and has alienated them even further.

If by "secularism" Barakat means a ban on the involvement of so-called "reactionary" forces in the political process, then he is not proposing a new solution, for that is exactly what the Arab regimes are already doing. Attempts at democracy that exclude Islamists have meant continuing suppression—as in Tunisia and Egypt—and have escalated to the point of civil war in Algeria. When the majority of Arabs opt against secularism and for the Islamic solution, regardless of its details or development (or lack thereof) at this point in its evolution, no democracy that excludes them can be called democracy. The refusal to acknowledge those who want Islam to shape their identities and guide their lives, as well as the refusal to accommodate them in a vision of the future, is a form of extremism that might well be called "secular fundamentalism."

Although this book offers some worthwhile insights on the dismal reality of the Arab world, its stress on an encompassing secularism as an essential element of its vision will not be helpful in transforming or transcending that reality. Moreover, by widening the genuine gap and exacerbating the misunderstanding between the Arab left and Islamists, Barakat does no one a service. If his work can be read—and I think it can—as an ideological justification for excluding adherents to the Islamist vision from the political process, as most Arab regimes are busy doing, then we are left with a vision that is truly "an impasse rather than a way out, and a threat rather than a promise."

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