

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

TRADITION, AUTHENTICITY AND CONTEMPORANEITY  
IN HUSSEIN MROUEH'S *THE MATERIALIST TENDENCIES IN  
ARAB-ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY*

by  
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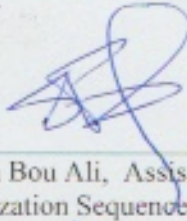
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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Francesco Anselmetti for Master of Arts  
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Title: Tradition, Authenticity and Contemporaneity in Hussein Mroueh's *The Materialist Tendencies of Arab-Islamic Philosophy*

In 1978, Hussein Mroueh published a four-volume history of medieval Islamic philosophy, *an-naza 'at al-maddiyya fi-l-falsafa al-'arabiyya al-islamiyya (The Materialist Tendencies in Arab-Islamic Philosophy)*, the pinnacle of his career as one of the leading intellectuals in Lebanon during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This thesis is an attempt to draw out the political claims the author explicitly makes in his study, the significance of which has hitherto been ignored by the limited reception the work has received outside of the Arab world. Mroueh's turn to the Arab-Islamic heritage (*turath*) and his desire to impart a sense of authenticity (*asala*) to the movement for Arab national liberation might bear the marks of a militant cultural nationalism, but I argue that his critique, reformulation and appropriation of these terms is the work's most distinguishing feature. I arrive at this argument by way of a close textual analysis of the work's introduction, along with an examination of the political and theoretical field in which the work was published. I then attempt to draw the philosophical and political-theoretical significance of Mroueh's two most salient formulations: the role of the present in the production of tradition, and the notion of authenticity as a state of being determined by the contradictions inherent in any social structure. This final discussion is based on an alternative conceptual history of the terms Mroueh utilises, which will also lead to a consideration of how different accounts of the 'transmission' of the language of politics under colonialism determines readings of intellectual production in the postcolony.

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## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

In order to facilitate reading, I have adhered to modified version of the transliteration system used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, which excludes diacritical marks, except for the *ayn* (‘) and the *hamza* (’). For given names, place names and other terms that have common equivalents in English, I have used their usual spelling.



## INTRODUCTION: “WHO KILLED MAHDI ‘AMIL?”

Of the thousands of images circulating online during the Lebanese *intifada* of late 2019, one in particular evoked the prevalent spirit of historic reckoning with the established political, economic and social order. “Who killed Mahdi ‘Amil?” an anonymous inquisitor had scrawled in red paint on the tarmac adjacent to Beirut’s abandoned opera house, at the heart of the reclaimed city centre. The question refers to a single individual, but it could just as well have invoked the names of Hussein Mroueh, Khalil N’ aous or Suheil Tawileh; a generation of writers, activists and militants associated with the communist movement in Lebanon<sup>1</sup>. All were assassinated, some particularly brutally, between the years 1986 and 1987.

Lying behind the query was also an implicit recrimination. Far from being an object of mystery, the culprits are well known — the initial success of sectarian parties such as the Amal Movement and Hezbollah in the 1980s relied on their ability to erode support for communism in south Lebanon, and the liquidation of the Lebanese Communist Party’s leading cadres had become expedient to their Syrian patrons. That their reactionary inclinations be underlined at such a moment was not coincidental; just days before the image surfaced, Hezbollah’s leadership had publicly reiterated its reluctance to give in to the streets’ demands. The graffiti was, amongst other things, a reminder of the consistency with which sectarian political forces have stunted the

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<sup>1</sup> Mahdi ‘Amil (b. Hassan Hamdan, 1926-87), a professor at the Lebanese University, was a widely published social theorist and poet. Hussein Mroueh (1908/10-87) was a literary critic and editor of the journal *al-tariq*. Khalil N’ aous (1935-86), a member of the Lebanese Communist Party’s Political Bureau, wrote for the publications *al-nida’*, *al-tariq* and *al-akhbar*. Suheil Tawileh (1941-86) was the editor of *al-nida’* and a member of the party’s Political Bureau. These were some of the most prominent figures targeted, others include the teacher Michel Waked (1947-85/86), the Sidon-based doctor and leading figure in the Lebanese People’s Aid Organization Lbeeb ‘Abdel Samad (1948-87) and Nour Touqan (1955-87), a leader in the party’s local branch in Beirut’s southern suburbs.

potential for meaningful social transformation from below, despite their self-fashioning as a popular resistance against Israeli aggression.

Beyond gesturing to history's cyclicity, however, the timely summoning of intellectuals whose thought was punctuated by the question of revolution begs an investigation into what import these thinkers' *oeuvre* might have in the present. As Miriam Younes notes, the leading intellectual figures of Lebanese communism, Mahdi 'Amil and Hussein Mroueh "are icons for many revolutionary movements today. They represent a paradigmatic model of leftist intellectuals, dedicating their life to an ideological political and social project of revolution, attempting to theorise, defend, and pursue it in the course of their lives"<sup>2</sup>. But despite their quasi-sacralised status, little work has been done to appraise their output as theorists; by virtue of their tragic deaths they are often remembered for what they stood against rather than what they stood for<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, this tendency is consistent with the way much of the modern intellectual production in the Arab world has been narrated. The historiography is dominated by the often-unqualified categories of anti-colonialism and anti-authoritarianism, which serve (or have actively sought) to flatten fundamental epistemological differences between theorists' formulations<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, the

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<sup>2</sup> M. Younes, "A Tale of Two Communists: The Revolutionary Projects of The Lebanese Communists Husayn Muruwwa and Mahdi 'Amil" in *The Arab Studies Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2016) p. 112.

<sup>3</sup> For notable exceptions, see S. Frangie, "Theorizing from the Periphery: The Intellectual Project of Mahdi 'Amil" in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3 (2012), pp. 465-482 and S. Frangie, "The Anatomy of a Crisis: On Mahdi 'Amil's *naqd al-fikr al-yawmi*" in *Arab Studies Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2016), 144-167.

<sup>4</sup> For an equation of Marxism and Islamism under the category of anti-colonial thought see O. Elshakry, "'History without Documents': The Vexed Archive of Decolonization in the Middle East" in *The American Historical Review*, vol. 120, no. 3 (2015) pp. 920-934.

abbreviation of figures such as Mroueh or ‘Amil to ‘secular critics’ or ‘Marxists’ might preserve their memory as members of a particular political current, but it does little to indicate the nature of their substantive claims as theorists.

Taking the work of Hussein Mroueh as its object of inquiry, both as a work of theory and as a understudied milestone in the history of modern Arab intellectual production, this thesis is an attempt to uncover overlooked elements of his political thought as expressed in the introduction of his *magnum opus*, *an-naza‘at al-maddiyya fi-l-falsafa al-‘arabiyya al-islamiyya* (*The Materialist Tendencies in Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, 1978)<sup>5</sup>. It does so by asking two fundamental questions: to begin with, what distinguishes Mroueh’s treatment of the Arab-Islamic philosophical heritage — the object of his study — from that of his contemporaries working both within and outside the Marxist tradition in the Arab world? Moreover, of what importance are these distinguishing features for philosophical and political-theoretical discussions of the relationship between culture, modernity and the political itself? My answers to these two questions depend on a particular interpretation of a broader historiographical concern with the way in which concepts are commonly read in Arab (and indeed much of postcolonial) intellectual history. When decoding Mroueh’s use of the political vocabulary of culturalism I treat his discourse as an expression of universal concerns in modernity rather than an assertion of local particularity. In other words, I read Mroueh’s argument for a movement for Arab liberation which is authentic as well as ‘contemporaneous’ as the moment in which he attempts to *critique* the politics of national essence

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<sup>5</sup> The author’s name (حسين مروءة) has been transliterated in a number of different ways in Western historiography: Husayn; Muruwah, Muruwah, Muroeh or Mroué. I have chosen to use the spelling closest to the name’s pronunciation in spoken Arabic. *an-naza‘at* has also been translated as ‘trends’, rather than ‘tendencies’.

as amounting to an idealist politics of the transcendental subject, rather an instance of hybrid national-Marxism as he has hitherto been read.

My argument relies on a reconstruction of what Mroueh means by ‘contemporaneity’, along with suggestions for a revision of the history of the concept of authenticity, the dominant understanding of which seems quick to dismiss it as an ideological construction, without however probing the *object* that it misconstrues. Indeed, aside from the answers to the particular questions I set out to investigate, one of the more generative directions this study takes is a revision of the conceptual history of colonial modernity offered both through remarks on the internal transformation of certain concepts in Arabic in the wake of the modern age, and a critique of how the process of conceptual transmission from metropole to periphery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is commonly understood. I argue both these interventions lead to a more compelling, open-ended and ultimately faithful reading of Mroueh’s critical impulses.

Mroueh was one of the Arab world’s foremost thinkers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the significance of his work remains opaque to most; the apex of his career as a writer is remembered primarily as an erudite work of historiography, despite its overtly political claims<sup>6</sup>. In his

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<sup>6</sup> For other engagements with Mroueh’s work, see A. N. Staif, “The Soviet Impact on Modern Arabic Literary Criticism: Husayn Muruwah’s Concept of the ‘New Realism’ in *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)*; vol. 11, no. 22 (1984) pp. 156-171; P. Gran, “Islamic Marxism in Comparative History: The Case of Lebanon, Reflections on the Recent Book of Husayn Muruwah” in B. Stowasser (ed.) *The Islamic Impulse* (London: Croom Helm, 1989) pp. 106-120; I. Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990) pp. 36-39; S. Tamari, “Reclaiming the Islamic Heritage: Marxism and Islam in the Thought of Husayn Muruwah” in *The Arab Studies Journal*; vol. 3, no. 1 (1995) pp. 121-129; I. Abu-Rabi’, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*; (London: Pluto Press, 2004) pp. 82-87 and 319; J. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) pp. 16-19 and 90-94; R. J. Abisaab, “Deconstructing the Modular and the Authentic: Husayn Muroeh’s Early Islamic History” in *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*; vol. 17, no. 3 (2008) pp. 239-259; Y. Di-Capua, “Homeward Bound: Husayn Muruwah’s Integrative Quest for Authenticity” in *Journal of Arabic Literature*; vol. 44 (2013) pp. 21-52; J. Hanssen, “Crisis and Critique: The Transformation of the Arab Radical Tradition between the 1960s and the 1980s” and S. Frangie “The Afterlives of Husayn Muruwah: The Killing of An Intellectual, 1987” both in L. Guirguis (ed.) *The Arab Lefts: Histories and Legacies, 1950s-1970s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming) pp. 222-242 and 243-258 respectively.

monumental study of the Arab-Islamic *turath* (heritage, in this case explicitly philosophical) written in the lead up to and during the early Civil War, Mroueh's stated aim is, rather cryptically, to solve "the problem of the relationship between present Arab thought and its past tradition (*wamadihi al-turathi*) on a new basis", he continues, "that is consistent with the revolutionary trends of the message of the Arab liberation movement at its current moment"<sup>7</sup>. What are we to make of this paradoxical turn to the past at a moment allegedly characterised by the 'alternative and indeterminate futures' that historians of decolonisation attribute to the emancipatory thought of the time?<sup>8</sup>

My aim is to argue that beyond any interest in the *content* of the Arab-Islamic *turath*, Mroueh's study of the history of philosophy was equally, or perhaps more interested in the *concept* of *turath* itself, and in demonstrating its origin in the present rather than the past. With this observation in mind, I then suggest that one of the principal reasons Mroueh preoccupies himself with such a lengthy historical appraisal of the history of medieval Islamic philosophy is in the interest of demonstrating the 'contemporaneity' (*mu'asira*) of all forms of thought — including, as will be seen the very *concept* of *turath* itself — to the social structure within which it is articulated, a quality he equates to that of authenticity (*asala*). It is this formulation, that of authenticity as being an expression of a given present, that Mroueh seems to prescribe as the key political implication of his study.

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<sup>7</sup> H. Mroueh, *an-naza'at al-maddiyya fi-l-falsafa al-'arabiyya al-islamiyya* (Beirut, Dar al-Farabi, 1978) p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> See M. Goswami, "Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms" in *The American Historical Review*, vol. 117, no. 5 (2012) pp. 1461-1485 and Elshakry, "History without Documents".

Yet Mroueh's critique of reified notions of tradition, which posit it as existing *outside* of modernity, sits awkwardly with his prescription of authenticity, that quintessential *topos* of culturalist nationalism, as a principle for political action. Mroueh relativises the objective past which lends the politics of nationalism its legitimacy, yet actively borrows one of the key concepts of its political vocabulary. One way of explaining this hybrid conceptual architecture has been to point to the affinity between Marxism and anti-colonial nationalism in the periphery, yet these accounts tend to overlook what is at stake in the discourse around authenticity, or at best treat its prescription as an aspiration in and of itself<sup>9</sup>. Rather than treating authenticity as necessarily presupposing nationalism, or an empty signifier conferred to the periphery during colonial rule, I will offer an alternative reading of what this concept might denote; the transformation of the autonomous subject of Enlightenment thought into a source of political authority in modernity, through, for instance, globalised notions of national self-determination and human betterment through progress. Proposing Mroueh's endorsement of authenticity as a relapse into nationalism both betrays the author's efforts to distinguish himself from this camp through his critique of common usages of tradition, and precludes *a priori* any possible dialogue between Mroueh's *oeuvre* and present political predicaments. Not only would this suggest a novel way in which to read some of the key terms of modern political debate in the Arab world, within and beyond Marxism; it also represents a method by which Mroueh, and others like him, might be made to speak to the present in a way that goes beyond the memorialisation of their martyrdom and the 'closing' of their political projects.

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<sup>9</sup> See Di-Capua, "Homeward Bound".

## Marx in Najaf

Hussein Mroueh was born into a prominent family of Shi‘a scholars in either 1908 or 1910<sup>10</sup>. His future as a *mujtahid* was predetermined for him by his father, Sheikh ‘Ali Mroueh; at the age of fourteen the young Mroueh was away from his home in Haddatha, south Lebanon, to pursue his studies in Iraq at the *hawza* in Najaf under the auspices of ‘Abdel-Hussein Sharaf ed-Din al-Musawi, at the time the leading clerical authority in the region. Framed by the events of the 1920 Iraqi revolt and the *wathbah* of 1948 (Mroueh would take part in the latter both in the streets and in print), his sojourn in Iraq shaped his political and intellectual upbringing. The clerical *milieu* in which Mroueh undertook his training experienced considerable internal debates over educational reform and pedagogical renewal at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; young students called for the broadening of the seminary’s curriculum and the incorporation of the *nahdawi* literary canon into their studies<sup>11</sup>. Witnessing first-hand the effects of British colonial control over Mandatory Iraq, Mroueh’s anti-imperialism was also forged in this period, as was his encounter with communism, becoming affiliated with the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) in the months after the uprising of 1948.

Returning to Lebanon in the early 1950s, Mroueh dedicated much of the subsequent twenty years to literary criticism, gaining notoriety at first through his pieces in Suhayl Idris’s *al-Adab*, whilst also integrating himself into the intellectual and political network around the Lebanese

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<sup>10</sup> For more detail on the author’s life see his own autobiography, published posthumously from a series of interviews with the poet Abbas Baydoun, *walidtu shaykan wa-amutu tiflan* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> An exhaustive account of this period can be found in R. J. and M. Abisaab, *The Shiites of Lebanon: Modernism, Communism, and Hizbullah’s Islamists* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014) esp. pp. 40-50 and 70-73.

Communist Party (LCP). The author spent a considerable part of the 1970s in Moscow researching the aforementioned *an-naza‘at al-maddiyya*, the four-volume history of the Arab-Islamic philosophical heritage (*turath*), from the *jahiliyya* to Ibn Sina, the pinnacle of his life’s work. The period also saw Mroueh’s promotion to the editorship of *al-Tariq* — the journal of political and cultural criticism closely affiliated to the LCP — a position he would hold until his assassination in February 1987.

Mroueh’s life spanned what might be termed the Arab world’s short twentieth century: the uneasy *chiaroscuro* between the crumbling of an old imperial order and its supersession by the nation-state, which even in its most progressive form seemed to constantly defer the promise of postcolonial emancipation<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, his death can be read as a symptom of the eclipse of this promise — at least in its secular form — coinciding as it did with the Islamisation of anti-colonial resistance and the collapse of the Soviet Union, combined with the more local “establishment of the *Pax Syriana*, the regional and domestic arrangement that ended the civil war” which drew “the parameters of the post-war settlement that followed”<sup>13</sup>.

It is not particularly surprising, then, that Mroueh and others like him have been read primarily through the prism of nationalist thought; the author’s early writings in *al-Adab* and, more generally, the tendency of anti-colonial thought to take as its objective ‘national’ liberation all justify taking Mroueh’s engagement with tradition as an attempt to demonstrate the latent Marxism in authentic ‘Arab’ thought, or, conversely, the grounding of the former in a non-Western

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<sup>12</sup> For a remarkable case study of the deferral of the political by the postcolonial state, see S. Pursley, *Familiar Futures: Time, Selfhood and Sovereignty in Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Frangie, “Afterlives”, p. 244.



genealogy<sup>14</sup>. But the text itself, despite using the vocabulary of nationalist thought, repeatedly contradicts it in its emphases on the artificiality of tradition and the futility of a return ‘to it’. Moreover, positing coherence between Mroueh’s early and late work ignores the possibility of his development as a thinker and, more broadly, the changing contours of political thought and practice in light of the Arab Nation’s dwindling purchase as a political force over the course of the 1970s, no doubt accentuated by the humiliations of the *naksa* and Camp David<sup>15</sup>.

Rather than dismiss Mroueh’s use of *asala* as an aporia of a second-grade thinker, or simply resign him to the ‘exhausted’ problem-space of anti-colonial nationalism, I will argue that his reformulation of authenticity represents the most distinguishing feature of his work, from the dual perspective of what I believe the author to have intended by the term, *and* from that of the revision of the history of the concepts he utilises<sup>16</sup>. Only after acknowledging what *asala* actually refers to when deployed by modern political discourse can we proceed to an appraisal of the work that overcomes the boundaries that have hitherto been used to limit its scope. If the political vocabulary of culturalism — heritage (*turath*), authenticity (*asala*), for instance — is understood as

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<sup>14</sup> See for instance Tamari, “Reclaiming the Islamic Heritage”.

<sup>15</sup> For examples of the tendency to understand Mroueh’s work as uniform see Di-Capua, “Homeward Bound” and Hanssen, “Hanssen, “Crisis and Critique”.

<sup>16</sup> Not least because the concept of authenticity has hitherto been construed — directly or indirectly — as somewhat of a ‘red herring’ in the history of modern Arab thought, most recently in F. Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism in the Bonds of Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020) pp. 2-3; see also E. S. Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) p. 24. | In this sense, Rula Jurdi Abisaab’s reading of Mroueh’s work as a critique of the debate between modularity and authenticity in the Orientalist historiography of early Islam is the only attempt in extant literature that comes close to appreciate the subversion Mroueh stages of the division of tradition and modernity, although it falls short when limiting this move to the realm of historiography. See Abisaab, “Deconstructing the Modular and the Authentic”.

expressing a misguided attempt on behalf of the colonised to respond to coloniser's subjugation, then the wielding of such concepts by theorists amounts to nothing more than an assertion of local particularity, both dangerous for the national chauvinism it authorises and ephemeral precisely because of its reflection of the very colonial epistemologies it sets out to resist. But what if culturalism's concern with singularity was understood, paradoxically, as an expression of the universal and "definitively 'modern' problematic of subjective autonomy"?<sup>17</sup>

This would provide a starkly different reading of the work of those who, like Mroueh, do not so much reject the logic of culturalism frontally as they deconstruct, adapt or otherwise critically engage with it. It would then be possible to uncover the meaning and implications of the author's formulation of 'authenticity as contemporaneity', as an attempt to replace the modern construction of authority around the sovereign subject (mediated in culturalism by a *Volksgeist*) with a view of the subject as determined ('contemporaneous'). But this determination is by no means static, as underpinning Mroueh's historical schema are the inherent contradictions that destabilise any social formation, of which class struggle is a symptom. In the final part of this thesis, I will argue that this translates not so much into a prescription of a particular politics but a circumscription of the political itself, as a field of contestation accessible in the present, thanks to the possibility of dissolution Mroueh suggests is immanent to any social structure.

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<sup>17</sup> A. Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) p. 67. | Such an account takes culturalism's negative freedom from imitation and dependency as a fundamentally analogous investment in subjective autonomy to liberalism's emphasis on human progress and self-improvement through the deployment of reason.

## Outline

To begin with, this study offers an analysis of the discussions contemporary to the publication of Mroueh's late work, which will serve to question the way in which it is currently remembered. This will pave the way for a close reading of the introduction of the *naza 'at*, the claims of which will subsequently be fully appraised, both at the level of philosophy and political theory, but also in terms of a certain history of the concepts of culture and authenticity I will argue they encourage.

Chapter I will provide an overview of the scholarly attention the work has received and the political and theoretical *milieu* surrounding the author and the work at the time of its writing. It will show how even in the minimal reception Mroueh has enjoyed in Anglophone scholarship, he has been understood in culturalist terms, as appropriating, recovering or otherwise asserting the relevance of the content of the Arab-Islamic philosophical heritage in modernity, a view seemingly shared by his Arab commentators<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, I justify Mroueh's critique of nationalism by pointing to the time of the *naza 'at*'s publication as a particularly fertile moment for the formulation of theoretical alternatives to the politics of nationalism, in Lebanon especially.

Chapter II offers a textual analysis of the lengthy methodological introduction to the *naza 'at*, in which Mroueh encloses the majority of the theory which underpins the study. I will show how Mroueh historicises *turath* on three levels; that of the content of tradition, its historiography and finally the *concept* of tradition itself, in order to theorise on the relationship between past and present. The predominance of the latter in the construction of the former underpins Mroueh's

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<sup>18</sup> See for instance A. Yaghi, *al-duktur Hussein Mroueh adiban naqidan* ('Amman: Dar al-Bashir, 1998)

understanding of ‘authenticity as contemporaneity’, whose origins as a formulation are also traced back through the work of Mahdi Mahdi ‘Amil and Youmna el-‘Eid.

The conclusion to this study is divided into three sections: the first section deals with the way in which the politics of culture is thought in relation to its origins in the history of 19<sup>th</sup> century colonialism, drawing on the insights of Andrew Sartori, who argues culturalism is a product of the universalisation of the idea of subjective autonomy through the globalisation of the commodity-form. With this view of culture in mind, in the second section I argue that the related term of authenticity relates more specifically to the *politicisation* of subjective autonomy in modernity. The third and final section of the concluding chapter offer suggestions as to what the ‘contemporaneity’ that authenticity is equated to in Mroueh’s work might denote as a political concept, along with its implications for a historiography self-avowedly tasked with the excavation, as per Reinhart Koselleck, of ‘futures past’.

## CHAPTER I: ARABISM INTERRUPTED

### The Spectre of Nationalism

In his study of late poetic modernism in Beirut, primarily through work published by Adonis, Yusuf al-Khal and Unsi al-Hajj, Robyn Creswell makes extensive use of Mroueh's early criticism of the *Sh'ir* collective to illuminate Arab literary debates of the 1950s and 1960s. Contraposed to the modernists' vision of aesthetic autonomy was a social realism, espoused by Mroueh, which was conceived as a tool for political struggle. Contrary to analogous disputes, such as the well-documented exchanges between Bloch, Lukács and Brecht two decades or so prior, these were not discussions that took place within the same broad set of political concerns<sup>19</sup>. On the one hand, Mroueh's Marxism was practically indistinguishable from anti-colonial nationalism, himself noting in *al-Adab* how the members of *Sh'ir* "would like for their humanism to transcend their patriotism"<sup>20</sup>. On the other was a liberalism whose critique of Arab nationalism was foundational, so much so its exponents for a time enjoyed sponsorship from Western intelligence agencies<sup>21</sup>.

Even though it was published some twenty years later, it is still possible to see how the combination of Mroueh's early thought and the subject matter of the *naza'at* has led to an inability to read him outside of a culturalist or nationalist paradigm. The predominant view of the history

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<sup>19</sup> See T. W. Adorno, W. Benjamin, E. Bloch & B. Brecht, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1980) esp. pp. 16-85.

<sup>20</sup> R. Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018) p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32-36.

of ‘heritage’ (*turath*) as an object of inquiry for Arab thinkers locate its origin as a response to “the impact of aggressive and hegemonic Westernisation”<sup>22</sup>. Tradition — literary, linguistic, philosophical, spiritual; to name but a few examples of what the term might enclose — either became something to be rejected in favour of modernisation or repurposed as a means to resist alienation in modernity. Daifallah offers a concise summary of this latter attempt at ‘recovering’ culture, both in its 19th and 20th century iterations. “19th century reinterpretations of the Islamic tradition” by figures such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani she argues, “sought to render it more relevant to the times”, whilst “debates since the early 1970s about ‘heritage and modernity’” sought primarily to reconfigure “an indigenous identity perceived to be under threat”<sup>23</sup>. The recovery of *turath*, in short, was to be the vehicle for the “postcolonial promise of genuine cultural independence”<sup>24</sup>.

Working with similar assumptions regarding the history of *turath* as a discursive formation, Mroueh’s commentators summarise his project as the rendering of communism more culturally palatable to the local masses, by demonstrating its similarity to historically ‘Arab’ philosophical traditions. The author’s claim in the work is to, in the words of Tamari, “uncover indigenous sources of radicalism to more firmly root the Arab liberation movement in a cultural context of its own”<sup>25</sup>. Di-Capua, writing some years later, rehearses Tamari’s claims with little variation,

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<sup>22</sup> I. Abu Rabi’, “Islamic Resurgence and the ‘Problematic of Tradition’ in the modern Arab world: the contemporary academic debate” in *Islamic Studies*, vol. 34, no. (1995) p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> Y. Daifallah, “*Turath* as Critique, Hassan Hanafi on the Modern Arab Subject” in J. Hanssen and M. Weiss (eds) *Arabic Thought against the Authoritarian Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) pp. 288-289.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>25</sup> Tamari, “Reclaiming the Islamic Heritage”, p. 123.

arguing that the *naza'at* seeks to emancipate a religious past, “thus reinventing and rendering it culturally usable in the present”<sup>26</sup>. Explaining Mroueh’s intellectual mission, Di-Capua credits him for his use of “synthetic literary and cultural criticism, as a vehicle for the renewal of Arab intellectual life towards the *making of an authentic Arab subject*”<sup>27</sup>.

This would render Mroueh’s late work not only remarkably coherent with the patriotism of his early years, a consonance Hanssen seems to suggest<sup>28</sup>. It would also represent an analogous move to the one made by the so-called Islamic modernists’ of the 19th century; the attempt to demonstrate the presence of the principles of Western scientific values in Islamic scriptural texts, undertaken by such figures as Muhammad ‘Abduh, Rashid Rida and Sa‘id Nursi. Mroueh, however, is clearly unsympathetic to this *salafi* project of synthesis, and his critique of these thinkers goes some way in dispelling the conclusions that have hitherto offered when attempting to characterise his work. “‘The ‘modernisation’ of past ideas and philosophies”, Mroueh claims in his introduction,

leads people to adopt the notion that past ideas and present thought (the ideas of the 20th century) are analogous. This is a metaphysical notion that denies the ‘historicity’ (*tarikhiyya*) and dynamism (*harakiyya*) of thought and condemns them

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<sup>26</sup> Di-Capua, “Homeward Bound”, p. 51.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52. | Emphasis added.

<sup>28</sup> “In *Materialist Tendencies in Arabic-Islamic Philosophy* Muruwwa identified a crisis in Arab thought, a crisis he had first articulated in an article for *al-thaqafa al-wataniyya* on the occasion of the communist celebration of the 1,000<sup>th</sup> *hijri* anniversary of Ibn Sina’s death in 1952. The remedy he proscribed in 1978, was a methodological critique.” | Hanssen, “Crisis and Critique”, p. 237.

to stasis (*wuquf*) and immobility (*jumud*) in addition to the transposition of categories such as capitalism, socialism, existentialism and individualism in their modern meanings, from the context of their social relationships to a historical context where they could not possibly have had any reason at all to exist. Adopting this notion of the analogy of ideas also leads to a simplification of contemporary philosophical ideas to the point of banality.<sup>29</sup>

Mroueh's critique of *salafi* ahistoricism demonstrates his preoccupations in the *naza'at* as lying less with the 'Arabisation' of Marxism, and more with problematising what he considers to be "attitudes towards tradition embedded in bourgeois nationalist thinking"<sup>30</sup>; that is to say, those political projects active at the time of his intervention that emphasised *reified* readings of the Arab cultural and philosophical heritage. This for Mroueh would include both calls to reject tradition, such as Sadeq Jalal al-'Azm's *Self-Criticism After the Defeat* (1968) and critique of religious thought; and overzealous endorsements of its supposed universality, an example of which might be Mohammad Baqer al-Sadr's *Falsafatuna* (1959)<sup>31</sup>. Despite these lying at the extremities of the two impulses to either adopt or reject *turath*, and indeed the existence of a hybrid position which "advocates a rapprochement between the Islamic tradition and Westernisation", exemplified for Ibrahim Abu Rabi' in the work of Hichem Djait, Muhammad Lahbabi (or most prominently, it

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<sup>29</sup> Mroueh, *an-naza'at*, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> M. B. al-Sadr, *falsafatuna* (Beirut, Dar al-Fikr, 1959) and S. J. al-'Azm, *al-naqd al-dhati b'ad al-hazima* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'ah, 1968). For other classic engagements with the question of culture in the history of Arab political thought, from a nationalist and a reluctant-liberal viewpoint respectively, see M. 'Aflaq, *fi sabil al-ba'ath* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'ah, 1963); and 'A. Laroui, *La crise des intellectuels arabes: traditionalisme ou historicisme?* (Paris: Maspero, 1974).



must be added, with Mohammad ‘Abed al-Jabiri) Mroueh’s argument against the reification of tradition stands; any call, even if limited, to ‘adapt’ tradition must still conceive of it as somehow separate to modernity and the present which generates it<sup>32</sup>. Different attitudes and propensities towards modernity, are all, in one way or another, identified as similar in their treatment of tradition as outside of it; whether in the interest of returning to the time of tradition in order to exit modernity, or in order to abandon tradition in order to enter it. As will be discussed shortly, rather than the content of the Arab *turath* (its primary figures, its authoritative texts, its thematic concerns), Mroueh is interested in the very process at work in these two responses to modernity; the temporalisation of tradition by the present as existing separately from or before it — a process *shared* by liberalism and culturalism — and the concomitant ideological fallacies this phenomenon authorises politically.

### **Laboratory Lebanon: Arab Marxist Theory, 1965-75**

Mroueh’s epistemological departures from nationalism, when considering the specific time in which *naza‘at* came to be, can be understood as part of a broader trend rather than the idiosyncrasies of an individual author. As early as 1962, the Egyptian sociologist Anouar ‘Abdel-Malek had published a critique of Nasserism from the left, not to mention Sadeq Jalal al-‘Azm’s post-*naksa* invectives against the Arab regimes’ ‘middle-roadism’<sup>33</sup>. The Soviet ‘victory’ of 1956

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<sup>32</sup> I. Abu Rabi‘, *Intellectual Origins of the Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996) pp. 40-41.

<sup>33</sup> See A. ‘Abdel-Malek, *Égypte, société militaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1962); al-‘Azm, *al-naqd al-dhati* and *naqd al-fikr al-dini* (Beirut, Dar al-Tali ‘ah, 1969).

and the Arab defeat in 1967 dealt blows to the legitimacy of state-led revolution, both globally and more locally. In Lebanon, the Second Congress of the LCP held in Beirut in July 1968 was a turning point in the history of the local and regional left. Seen as a necessity in order to update and invigorate party activity since its first general meeting in 1943-44, the Congress effectively seized the opportunity presented by the Soviet condemnation of Israel's actions in the Six Day War to change its position on the question of Palestine. Arab communist parties had been forced to tow the Soviet line regarding the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947, to which the USSR had assented, hoping that the new Jewish state would embrace socialism and act as a bulwark against Western imperialism in the region. Responding to this change in policy, "the LCP took the initiative in the forefront of the Arab communist parties," Ismael notes, "both in its open criticism of past positions and in its increasing support of the re-emerging Palestinian movement"<sup>34</sup>. The alliance that coalesced around an ascendant PLO, combined with unprecedented worker, student and syndicate-led insurrections against the Lebanese bourgeoisie in the lead up to the Civil War must have, in the eyes of some, tilted the scales of revolutionary agency away from the bloated bureaucracies of the Arab regimes and into the purview of popular grassroots movements<sup>35</sup>.

Politically, though, such a rupture should not be considered total, nor was it particularly widespread. The characteristically 'stagist' logic that underpinned the reform program espoused by the Lebanese National Movement, the coalition of pro-Palestinian groups that fought against

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<sup>34</sup> T. Y. and J. S. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998) p. 95.

<sup>35</sup> F. Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2012) pp. 145-170.

Lebanese isolationism in the opening acts of the war, is well documented: “the LNM (under the influence of the Marxist Left) had drawn the conclusion that it had... to impose a new superstructure on the Lebanese oligarchy – ‘bourgeois’, modern and non-sectarian instead of ‘feudal’, sectarian and ‘underdeveloped’”<sup>36</sup>. By 1977, the National Movement’s “discourse was progressively slipping toward an Arab nationalist one with sectarian themes, in which sects were divided between ‘patriotic’ and ‘non-patriotic’ ones”<sup>37</sup>.

Theoretically too, it must be said that the aforementioned critiques of the Arab regimes did not represent clean breaks with their underlying logic, but reproaches of what both ‘Abdel-Malek and al-‘Azm deemed *deviations* from the correct trajectory of a national revolution. Whether it was the Egyptian state’s creation of a new managerial class that oversaw the massive development projects of ‘Abdel-Nasser’s economic policy, or the revolution’s inability to stamp out pre-modern, anti-scientific ‘traditionalism’, neither author seems to doubt that if these tendencies were corrected the nation could still have delivered on its promise of emancipation.

There were, however, nuclei of intellectuals that operated with the explicit intention of undermining the orthodoxy of their times. What distinguished the engagements of *Lubnan Ishtiraki* (Socialist Lebanon), Fadi Bardawil argues, is best expressed in their collective commentary of *The Communist Manifesto* which appeared in the journal *Dirasat ‘Arabiyya* in 1969. Underlining the importance Marx attributes to the sphere of the political on the development of the forces of production was a way for the group to identify the basic faults in the local and regional left-establishment’s all-too-ready adoption of Stalinist economism, which prescribed the necessity of

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

a stage of either capitalist or socialist development before the barriers to communism could be breached<sup>38</sup>. For the group (comprising, amongst others, Fawwaz Traboulsi, Waddah Charara and Ahmad Baydoun), detailed analysis of local specificities would pave the way to a popular seizure of power that could bypass the counter-productive negotiations the orthodox parties were engaged in with the bourgeois state.

Another such instance of *coupure*, one more relevant to understanding the work of Mroueh, was staged by Mahdi ‘Amil. Remembered as one of the most innovative theorists of his generation, his work on sectarianism and the political economy of imperialism is still read today<sup>39</sup>. Despite being a prominent member of the Communist Party, Amil’s positions seem inconsistent with many of the official policies. For instance, *azmat al-hadara al-‘arabiyya am azmat al-burjwaziyyat al-‘arabiyya?* (*Crisis of Arab Civilisation or Crisis of the Arab Bourgeoisies?* 1974), a book-length response to a literary conference held in Kuwait that year, contains a whole section critically examining the national question, dismissing the nation as a concept extraneous to Marxist theory<sup>40</sup>. Indeed, where ‘Amil arguably goes beyond Socialist Lebanon’s rereading of Marx is in his

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<sup>38</sup> Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment*, pp. 69-72.

<sup>39</sup> See M. ‘Amil, *fi-d-dawla at-ta’ifiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1986) and M. ‘Amil, *fi namat al-intaj al-kulunyali* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1973).

<sup>40</sup> See M. ‘Amil, “fi naqd mafhum ‘al-marksiiyya al-wataniyya’: ‘al-marksiiyya al-wataniyya’ hiyya naqid al-marskiyya” (“On the contradictory nature of ‘national Marxism’: ‘national Marxism’ contradicts Marxism”) in *azmat al-hadara al-‘arabiyya am azmat al-burjwaziyyat al-‘arabiyya?* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1974), pp. 162-165.

repeated insistence on the necessity for theory to be based on the production and reformulation of concepts, in order to better understand reified objects presented as given by capitalist ideology<sup>41</sup>.

One such object is that of *turath*; ‘tradition’ or ‘heritage’, which Mroueh takes as the central thematic of his late work. The casting of tradition to a past that must either be returned to, in the arguments of culturalist nationalism, or departed from in the interests of modernisation obscures the fact that tradition for Mroueh is produced from the vantage point of the present and that these particular ‘visions’ of the past are used to authorise contemporary politics. Taking this formulation of *turath* seriously invites a reading of Mroueh as part of a plurality of theoretical critiques of postcolonial Arab nationalism which accompanied its political decline of the 1970s. Specifically, these critiques seem to have taken aim at what might be termed nationalism’s political temporality, whether in the form of an illegitimate ‘measurement’ of the present in terms of the past, or the deferring of the political present in the interests of the maturing of conditions for future struggle.

It is in this spirit of conceptual innovation that I propose to read the *naza‘at*, as embedded in this moment of theoretical exploration prompted by shifting political contours. This reading is further validated by Mroueh himself in the opening pages of his work, where he acknowledges the infancy of the epistemologically distinct field of *turath* studies he seeks to establish, if for one notable exception. Referring to ‘Amil’s aforementioned critique of the Kuwait literary conference,

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<sup>41</sup> “My impression is that much of the criticism I have read or listened to *has mistaken its object*. This does not surprise me particularly, but I see in this a significance that goes beyond these critics and what they write, extending to the structure of contemporary Arab thought, especially its most subscribed currents. When some take the coherence of its internal structure, the rigour of its logic and begin extracting from it theoretical concepts... this is done from a position of ignorance *vis-à-vis* scientific thought... neglecting the necessary role of theoretical concepts in the production of knowledge, through which *thought works on its object*, which is preceding thought (*m‘arifa sabiqā*). These tools are not ready; they must be produced or reproduced as is the case with Marxist theoretical concepts”. | M. ‘Amil, *fi-t-tanaqud* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, [1973] (2013) p. 14. Emphasis added.

Mroueh notes that “so far only a single work places the philosophical *turath* in its overall context. In the field of theoretical research into the question of *turath*... we find only one study that treats the problem of the intellectual tradition that departs from [the notion] *that it is a problem for current Arab thought rather than a problem of past thought*”<sup>42</sup>. As will be seen in the following section, it is not just in the grounding of his study in the present that Mroueh is indebted to ‘Amil; he also borrows from the latter’s discussions on the need to recover the concept of authenticity from culturalism and reformulate it, in what I take to be an attempt at underlining the inherent possibility for social transformation in the present, through a critique of the modern belief in subjective autonomy.

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<sup>42</sup> Mroueh, *an-naza‘at*, p. 9. Emphasis added.

## CHAPTER II: HUSSEIN MROUEH'S *MATERIALIST TENDENCIES*

Proceeding through the different theoretical moves Mroueh makes in the introduction to the *naza'at*, a contradiction surfaces when attempting to read his interest in *turath* outside of the logic of nationalism. If the past, the author argues, is rendered unrecognisable to the present through shifts in the organisation of a determining social structure, rendering the 'analogy of ideas' obsolete, what significance do past ideas retain in the present?

Three interrelated arguments the introduction to the *naza'at* will be examined to make sense of this question. The first is his repeated claim that his interest in the history of materialism in Islamic philosophy is primarily *historical*, and *not* an attempt to put it in dialogue and contemporary emancipatory thought<sup>43</sup>. By uncovering hidden examples of materialist thought in the history of Islamic philosophy Mroueh claims to account for it more accurately than his contemporaries, a view informed by his faith in a distinctly Soviet understanding of the history of philosophy as constituted by a quasi-eternal conflict between idealism and materialism. This schema is not arbitrary; the two strands of thought correspond to the ideology of the oppressor and the oppressed at any given time, and it is as evidence for the historical universality of class struggle that Mroueh is interested in demonstrating the existence of materialist thought in mediaeval Islamic philosophy, rather than any adaptive impulse beyond this endeavour.

Grasping thought as ultimately expressing the contradiction between two antagonistic classes is what reveals its historical contingency, the second insight fundamental to understanding

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<sup>43</sup> This is not to deny the possibility of a connection between metaphysical materialism and Marxist philosophy; notable examples of such efforts include Bloch's *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* (1963), Althusser's late writings published in translation as *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987* (2006) and Negri's *Kairós, Alma Venus, Multitudo* (2000). My point is to show how, contrary to how he has been read, this line of inquiry lies outside of Mroueh's project.

Mroueh's work. This historicisation of forms of thinking within the Arab philosophical tradition allows Mroueh to argue further that both the historiography of Arab philosophy and the concept of *turath* itself, the object of his study, are a function of his present, rather than representing an objective past that can or should be rediscovered.

Connecting this back to the movement for Arab liberation, Mroueh then argues that the sense of authenticity the movement should aspire to — or the form of historical consciousness it should wield, perhaps — is that of being contemporaneous, or a product of the contradictions inherent in any present; a quality he seeks to uncover as latent, but evident if read properly in the work of various philosophers of the Arab-Islamic tradition. The present analysis limits itself to the introduction in which Mroueh articulates his major theoretical statements. The subsequent volumes of his study — which certainly merit further investigation in their own right — deal with, respectively: the emergence of Islam during the life of the Prophet, the Mu'tazilite-'Asharite debates, Sufism and the Ikhwan al-Safa', followed by studies on al-Kindi, al-Farabi and ibn Sina.

## **Mroueh's Historiography of Arab-Islamic Philosophy**

The underlying principle with which Mroueh evaluates the content of *turath* is the epochal struggle between idealism and materialism, which, he claims, is a feature common to the history of philosophy “whether in Europe or in the Arab and Islamic countries, or in India and China”<sup>44</sup>. He thus understands all philosophical inquiry to be reducible to one of two positions regarding ontological primacy; the prioritisation of “the material world as predating consciousness, and as

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<sup>44</sup> Mroueh, *an-naza'at*, p. 27.



an eternal (*azli*) objective reality that exists independently of any force outside of it” (materialism), or the relegation of the external world to either a pure function of consciousness (subjective idealism), or that of “some eternal force that is outside of the world's existence”<sup>45</sup> (objective idealism). But whilst Mroueh places both Epicurus and Marx on the same ‘side’ of the history of philosophy, and repeatedly seeks to explain the emergence of materialist philosophy at different instances in history as an expression of constitutive social contradictions, his concern with forms of materialist thought seem to be in the interest of historiographical accuracy rather than philosophical creativity. The author merely wishes to point to the existence of materialist trends in the history of Islamic philosophy, thereby recalibrating the historical record to account for the universality of class struggle. Thus, rather than the early Marx’s engagement with pre-Socratic atomism, Mroueh’s framework seems far more indebted to the canonisation of certain texts by Engels under Stalin, via Plekhanov and Lenin; specifically *Anti-Dühring* (1878) — quoted at length in the opening pages of his introduction — and *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (1886)<sup>46</sup>. The struggle between idealism and materialism is assumed as a fundamental insight of Marxist science, and the author understood his duty to be the rigorous application of this method, proving its validity by way of uncovering the two contradicting tendencies in the history of Arab philosophy, whose idealist side had been grossly overstated by over a century of bourgeois-Orientalist scholarship.

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45. | On the transformation of Marx’s critique of political economy into a comprehensive worldview, see both J. P. Scanlan, *Marxism in the USSR* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) pp. 21-56, and M. Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Marx’s Capital*; A. Locascio (trans.) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012) pp. 23-27.

In the exhaustive appraisal Mroueh offers of the historiography of Arab-Islamic philosophy contemporary to his time, the relative importance commentators attribute to idealist, materialist or — especially in his discussion of mysticism — rationalist tendencies becomes the criteria by which the author judges histories of the subject<sup>47</sup>. In a survey of French Orientalist scholarship, the author identifies an endemic fascination with Sufism, which he argues serves to sideline important contributions by Muslim philosophers to the development of rationalist thought. French Orientalists Bernard Carra de Vaux and Louis Massignon, for instance, are both charged with over-emphasising the imprint of mysticism on the work of al-Farabi, thereby “casting doubt on the fact that al-Farabi was in line (*bi-insijam*) with the rationalist tendency”<sup>48</sup>, despite the philosopher’s clear indebtedness to the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions of Late Antiquity.

A major paradox of Orientalist histories is that their alleged inability to see Arab philosophy as partaking in universal rationalist discourse (beyond its religious specificities) came hand in hand with a recognition of the profound affinities between Islamic mysticism and corresponding traditions of religious ecstasy around the world<sup>49</sup>. By the same measure, Amélie-Marie Goichon’s 1944 work on *La Philosophie d’Avicenne et son Influence en Europe Médiévale* is praised in the *naza‘at*, in particular for its rejection of the idea that ibn Sina’s later work represented a turn to Sufism<sup>50</sup>, whilst the Soviet historian of philosophy Orest Trakhtenberg is

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<sup>47</sup> At no point does Mroueh discuss the relationship he implies between materialism and rationalism. For obvious reasons, conflating the two terms is problematic, but the assumption Mroueh could be working with is that whilst not all rationalism leads to materialism, all materialist philosophy is ultimately based on rational thinking, which he deems to be foreign to Sufi thought.

<sup>48</sup> Mroueh, *an-naza‘at*, p. 163.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

lauded for his recognition of ibn Rushd's view of the "independence of matter (*al-madda*) from consciousness, or in other words, the objectivity (*mawdu' iyya*) of the existence of the world"<sup>51</sup>.

Mroueh is clearly concerned with the erasure of rationalist and materialist thought in the history of Islamic philosophy, but he is perhaps even more perplexed at the notion that once proved, the existence of these currents might somehow prove the validity of the Arab philosophical tradition in its anticipation of modern philosophy *avant la lettre*. He dismisses the clearly pervasive impulse to find, for instance, the roots of existentialism in the Islamic philosophical tradition, as exemplified by the renowned Egyptian philosopher 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi's *al-ananiya wa-l-wujudiya fi al-fikr al-'arabi* (*Egoism and Existentialism in Arab Thought*, 1948)<sup>52</sup>. Mroueh's interest in *turath*, then, must necessarily lie beyond returning to and adapting its philosophical content. His engagement with tradition can scarcely be read as an attempt to voice concerns about its erosion in modernity, nor does he seem interested in grounding Marxism in an indigenous intellectual tradition. But whilst the continuity between the Arab intellectual heritage and the present is rejected, Mroueh's account is clearly not advocating for the inutility of *turath* in modernity, as some of his Marxist contemporaries would have argued<sup>53</sup>. There would be little reason for Mroueh to write extensively on the history of Arab-Islamic philosophy, as he does in the remaining three volumes of the *naza'at*, if this were indeed the case.

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192. | Out of all of his historiographical appraisals, Mroueh is clearly most sympathetic to his Soviet contemporaries, perhaps unsurprisingly given the location of the work's writing, although given the years the author spent in Moscow the respects paid were likely owed as much to academic influence as they were motivated by political loyalty.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> See al-'Azm, *al-naqd al-dhati*, pp. 79-84, amongst others.

The question persists: how does Mroueh justify his interest in *turath* beyond the field of historiography, and how does he connect it to the movement for Arab national liberation *in keeping* with his consistent critique of bourgeois nationalism's instrumentalisation of the past?

## Historicising the Concept of Tradition

Despite his heavy-handed historiographical framework, beholden as it is to Soviet orthodoxy, it is Mroueh's notion of the artificiality of tradition that paves the way for the most interesting and original moments in his work. It is this idea that can help explain his simultaneous interest and dismissal of the utility of the Arab-Islamic intellectual heritage. The content of *turath*, contrary to its everyday understanding, may only be grasped in its "flesh and blood" (*lahmih w-dammih*) if understood as "an intellectual product tied to the dynamic of social activity (*harakat nashat ijtima'i*) that has its own particular historicity"<sup>54</sup>. Much in the same way as he does in his explanation of the historicity of mediaeval Arab philosophy, Mroueh also argues that the *historiography* of mediaeval Arab philosophy — or understandings (*ma'arif*) of tradition — can ultimately be tied back to commentators' different class-perspectives. Aggregating the resemblances, congruences or contradictions between them into variations of different (ultimately two; idealist and materialist) epistemological frameworks, Mroueh concludes that "all knowledge of tradition, produced by a historian, an exegete or an scholar, ancient or modern, has behind it an ideological position (*mawqaf idyuluji*), which is fundamentally a class-position (*mawqaf tabaqi*)"<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Having subjected the Arab philosophical tradition to historicisation, along with its historiography, Mroueh then proceeds to historicise the very concept of tradition itself. Such is the importance of the contingency of forms of thought to their present that he ultimately submits the object of his study, *turath*, to similar scrutiny. In the *naza'at*, Mroueh observes how *turath* emerged as a distinct concept in the context of the *nahda* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for authors concerned with the implications of Europe's accelerating military and economic encroachment of the Arab world. If initial, *fin de siècle* perceptions of (primarily scientific) underdevelopment triggered re-readings of religious, legal and philosophical texts that had previously commanded authority — Mroueh continues — tradition was subsequently appropriated and weaponised in the formation of Arab nationalism, which sought to assert the validity of a history suppressed by colonialism to bolster calls for political independence in the present<sup>56</sup>.

But Mroueh departs from what would otherwise be a repetition of the dominant narrative of 19<sup>th</sup> century engagements with culture in one fundamental way; he seems to suggest that the emergence global capitalism *produced* a novel conception of tradition that was temporalised as outside of modernity. Despite their progressive intentions, Mroueh argues, both the first and second *nahda* were premised on a fundamental error; the repeating of *turath* in “a distorted form without adding, developing or reconsidering its forms and contents”<sup>57</sup>. To be sure, *salafi* methodologies, the term Mroueh uses as a shorthand to denote this dominant paradigm in the study of *turath*, are culpable for “highlighting the metaphysics and idealism” of the Arab philosophical

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

tradition, but the real issue with this approach is the transformation of *turath* from “a question [relating to] the present itself” into a problematic which “projects the past *onto* the present”<sup>58</sup>.

The *salafi* insistence on the validity of the past ignores, for Mroueh, the fact it begins “from an insistence which reverses... [the *salafi*] commitment to the past”. Through their understanding of *turath* as a phenomenon outside of the present culturalist commentators “take as their premise the position which they occupy in the hierarchy of the present social structure (*haramiyyat al-bunya al-ijtima'iyya al-hadira*)”<sup>59</sup>. Mroueh’s formulation of tradition as a function of the present immediately clarifies the invectives he launches against those calling for the abandonment of tradition in favour of modernisation, or those interested in returning to the foundational texts of Islam in order to demonstrate the immanent modernity they contain. These fail to grasp modernity’s complicity in the creation of the concept of tradition itself, a recognition of which immediately nullifies any attempt to locate the latter anywhere outside of the former.

It follows from this observation that for Mroueh *turath* is not something that can be merely ‘left behind’ or ‘adapted’, as liberal, nationalist or Islamist paradigms would propose. *Turath* denotes a particular way of construing the past that is determined by the balance of contradictory forces in any given social structure; it is “not subject to reality of the tradition itself, or with its temporal (*zamaniyya*) or social conditions”, than it really pertains to “the time in which that knowledge is produced” and “those who produce this knowledge”<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36. Emphasis added.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

It is clear that Mroueh's interest in *turath* goes beyond the need to recalibrate knowledge of the past on the "on the basis of the ideology of the revolutionary forces of the present"<sup>61</sup>; it is not simply a question of 'matching' historical materialism with an antecedent philosophy of the oppressed. Mroueh's historical inquiry, therefore, amounts to a threefold case-study into the relationship between intellectual production and the social structure which determines it; an investigation undertaken at the level of mediaeval philosophy itself, its historiography, and the very concept of tradition, which represents the dominant historical lens through which it is understood.

### **Authenticity as Contemporaneity**

The emphasis Mroueh places on the historicity of the concept of *turath* allows him to develop a discussion of what he deems to be the issue underlying calls to adapt, retain or otherwise 'modernise' its content; the problem of authenticity (*asala*). Mroueh is sceptical of both the philosophical plausibility and the political effects of a vision of an Arab modernity that is authenticated, or otherwise validated by its continuity with and retention of the past, even if this impulse comes as a response to the historical rupture often attributed to colonial domination. The charge levelled at imperialism here is not primarily the suppression of Arab identity, but the introduction of a notion of "contemporaneity that is *separate* from authenticity. This is a concept," Mroueh continues, "which bears the imprint of imperialism, that over a long history... prepared for the possibility of depriving contemporary Arab thought of its 'historicity' [contingency], to make it possible to tie it in ideological subservience to Western colonial thought"<sup>62</sup>. The

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53. Emphasis added.

intellectual distortion that colonialism triggers at the level of historical consciousness thus operates on the plane of form, rather than content. There can be no doubt that colonial historiography downplayed or stressed the relative importance of certain historical facts in order to present distorted *narratives* of the Arab past, but more fundamentally for Mroueh it introduced the idea that the Arab past can be deployed in the interests of ‘measuring’ the present, the unit of authenticity representing the relative consistency between the two.

This, however, does not mean that Mroueh dismisses the notion of authenticity completely; for him authenticity is synonymous with the aforementioned concept of historicity. To be authentic is thus less the proximity to a transhistorical Arab identity, as understood by nationalism; it is rather a state of historical consciousness that grounds both present and past thought as determined by contingent (and constantly evolving) social and economic forces. In other words, for the ‘movement for Arab liberation’ that he all but dedicates his study to, being authentic involves grasping itself as being an expression of a constellation of social forces in the present, in the same way that the authenticity of key works in Arab intellectual tradition in question is established by connecting it them to the social structure in which they were articulated, rather than through expression of an Arab-Islamic essence or their anticipation of Enlightenment rationality. The political thought of the Arab movement for national liberation is thus freed from the burden of autochthony, dispelling the oft-repeated critique of Marxism’s foreignness to Arab thought<sup>63</sup>. Further, for Mroueh the self-recognition of the revolutionary masses as *both* ‘authentic’

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<sup>63</sup> It was communism’s increasing political purchase amongst the working-class inhabitants of Najaf and other Iraqi cities that famously prompted the young Muhammad Baqer al-Sadr to write his *falsafatuna* (1959) and *iqtisaduna* (1961). For more context and a full appraisal of the cleric’s *oeuvre* see C. Mallat, *The Renewal of Islamic Law: Muhammad Baqer al-Sadr, Najaf and the Shi’i International* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).



and ‘contemporaneous’ supplies the necessary legitimacy to pursue autonomous political action, rather than any authority derived from a transcendentalised past, or, for that matter, the deferred, utopian future of postcolonial state-socialism.

As I suggested earlier, Mroueh draws on the work of ‘Amil and that of his colleague at the Lebanese University, the structuralist literary critic Youmna el-‘Eid, when attempting to formulate a Marxist theory of authenticity. As such, I propose that the pair’s work forms the necessary theoretical backbone to fully understanding the implications of Mroueh’s study of *turath*. el-‘Eid, as with ‘Amil, was a regular contributor to *al-Tariq*; her 1973 review of Egyptian scholar Ghali Shukri’s *al-turath... wa-l-thawra* (*Turath.... and Revolution*, 1973) is quoted at length by ‘Amil in *azmat al-hadara*, where he notes how culturalist discourse around authenticity “hides the determination of specific characteristics of real contradictions” of the present, thus hindering “the determination of its practical solutions”<sup>64</sup>. For ‘Amil, much like Mroueh, Arab history is a function of the present; the past is *created* by a relationship of dependence to former colonisers, rather than through its rediscovery in their spite. ‘Amil argues that common understandings of the status of *turath* since the 19<sup>th</sup> century grasp the nature of the Arab world’s entrance into capitalist modernity through colonisation as an “cultural or civilisational rupture”, rather than a process which represented “the movement of history itself”<sup>65</sup>.

Thus, rather than being actually severed from the present, the Arab past was *historicised* in such a way that it “was deprived of its present” and its constitutive contradictions, understood as the only legitimate standpoint from which historicisation can take place<sup>66</sup>. Authenticity for

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<sup>64</sup> M. ‘Amil, *azmat al-hadara al-‘arabiyya am azmat al-burjwaziyyat al-‘arabiyya?* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1974) p. 175.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

‘Amil is involves wielding knowledge of social reality so as to understand it as an expression of contradictions which are deemed constitutive and ultimately determinant of all modes of spontaneous consciousness, including historical understanding. Referring to el-‘Eid’s work, ‘Amil refines his analysis of how these contradictions might be located, identifying the “exercise of class struggle” as the site of the immanent authenticity of the present; as el-‘Eid herself states in her own essay, the ‘choice’ modern ideology presents between authenticity and contemporaneity is rendered meaningless once one recognises the role of present contradictions (of which class struggle is a symptom) in creating the very past that is understood as the source of authenticity<sup>67</sup>.

The resulting attitude towards *turath*, as ‘Amil notes, cannot be one of rejection. Dismissing *turath* entirely without engaging with the historical dynamic it represents would mean missing an opportunity to expose the particular obfuscations that colonial-capitalist modernity presents as natural construals of reality. Neither the liberal (and oftentimes orthodox Marxist) impulse to “reject *turath* and [deny] it”, nor the culturalist tendency to “revive it, preserve it in the present and repeat it, in the name of authenticity” adequately grasps the concept, an understanding of which would effectively free the Arab liberation movement from even attempting to ‘resolve’ or ‘find a solution’ to it, permitting in its stead a politics derived from the exigencies of the present<sup>68</sup>. It is precisely this process that ‘Amil identifies as the intellectual liberation that must accompany, and perhaps precede the process of national liberation.

What is stark here is an understanding of epistemological emancipation which lies outside the more common discourse of the Western colonial imposition of foreign conceptual *apparati*,

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<sup>67</sup> Y. el-‘Eid, “at-turath, al-asala wa-l-mu‘asira” in *al-Tariq*, 9 (1973) pp. 84-89.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Amil, *azmat al-hadara*, p. 193.

and instead seeks to underline the modernity of the use of the very concepts of ‘authenticity’ and ‘foreignness’ themselves in this context. The particular view the reader takes of the intellectual and philosophical repercussions of the Arab experience of modernity, and its generation of particular notions such as that of *turath* — whose nature “cannot be understood in terms of its structure except in relationship with this modern colonial social structure”<sup>69</sup> according to ‘Amil — is thus fundamental to understanding the political claims of Mroueh’s (and indeed ‘Amil and el-‘Eid’s) work, beyond the ill-suited categories of orthodox Marxism, liberalism or culturalist nationalism. Mroueh’s engagement with the question of authenticity, far from being limited to historiographical critique, is consistently reflected back onto the political exigencies felt by the author in the present. Although there are few direct references to Islamist or nationalist movements anywhere in the introduction, it is more than justified to suppose that the impulse “to reveal the historical dimensions of the present Arab revolutionary movement” in order to demonstrate its dual contemporaneity and authenticity stems as much from a particular theory of history as it does from a critique of modes of politics that establish transhistorical cultural or spiritual continuities with a mythical Arab past, especially considering the well-rehearsed nativist critique of socialist politics, articulated both by secular nationalism and rising Islamist currents<sup>70</sup>.

The grounds for embarking on such a voluminous study, despite the content of the Arab-Islamic philosophical tradition retaining little practical significance for Mroueh, thus lies in the opportunity it presents the author to expound — at length, and on different planes — his conviction of the ultimate determination social structure has on forms of thinking. This view is tested in three distinct ways throughout Mroueh’s introduction; at the level of the mediaeval philosophical

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>70</sup> Mroueh, *an-naza’at*, p. 36.

tradition itself, with regards to its historiography, and in terms of the very concept that frames his study; *turath* itself. Mroueh's interest in the contingency of thought lies in the way in which these qualities or phenomena might contribute to the construction of a new understanding of authenticity for the movement for Arab liberation of which he was an integral part, by way of a critique of notions of cultural authenticity which dominated the politics of his time. The philosophical significance of this effort, which I will venture to understand through the history of the concept of authenticity and its relationship to authority and tradition, will be treated fully in the following section.

## CONCLUSION: THE AUTHORITY OF THE PRESENT

Perhaps the most notable aspect of Mroueh's study of *turath* is the way it simultaneously engages with and undermines the terms of the debates around Arab culture, whose origins are commonly dated to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Decoding Mroueh's adaptation of the political vocabulary of nationalism, I argue that a reading of his political thought that takes seriously his critique of culturalism necessitates a markedly different understanding of the conceptual history of authenticity in Arab political modernity. Whilst I do not intend to make the claim that Mroueh's introduction *directly* invites this reading, I nonetheless consider this exercise essential for what I understand to be the practice of intellectual history, which cannot simply be limited to the reconstruction of thought in context (as Mroueh himself would have it, rather ironically), but must also be open to a "critical engagement with a given idea" in the interests of *enhancing* "that idea's possibilities"<sup>71</sup>. After all, circumscribing the history of political thought to an investigation into its conditions of its possibility seems to preclude prematurely its utility to the related fields of philosophy and political theory. What would these latter disciplines be if it was not for the creative and critical adaptation of ideas beyond the boundaries of authorial intent? Behind my appraisal of Mroueh's work in these concluding remarks lies a conviction in the essentially dialogic nature of historical inquiry; even the most neutral interpreter ultimately commits the same excesses their passivity seeks to avoid. Arguments in favour of the originality of the work of one philosopher over another always involves an element of instrumentality on behalf of the interpreter. The difference between my approach and a more exhaustive contextualism is that the process of interpretation — arbitrary as it may

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<sup>71</sup> P. Gordon, "Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas" in M. McMahon and S. Moyn (eds) *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) p. 51.

seem — is drawn from questions the work leaves unanswered and is valued as a product of the work itself, all the while broadening its scope and conserving the critical impulse which renders it compelling.

Rather than mount a complete critique of the logic of authenticity — be that the culturalists' authentic past or liberal-humanist confidence in modernity as an authentic stage in the development of man — Mroueh seeks to replace or construct a novel form of authenticity around the quality of contemporaneity. This only appears as a capitulation to the modes of thought he critiques if authenticity is understood as an empty signifier belonging to a nationalist ideology of distinctly European origins. A revised reading of the concept, one that understands it as *misconstruing* a meaningful referent, that of authority in modernity, generates a far more original picture of Mroueh's thought. As will be seen, the difference between reading discourses of authenticity as colonial (and therefore somehow exogenous) impositions onto Arab political thought, and grasping them, on the other hand, as being an expression of a *global* concern in modernity is the difference between understanding Mroueh as a thinker trapped by the aporias of modern intellectual inquiry or one actively attempting to subvert them.

### **The 'Culture Concept': Theories of Transmission**

A problem for culturalism in the formerly colonised world has been that the categories it wields are understood to be derived from the very coloniser that is the object of its resistance; it is no secret that the modern usages of 'culture', 'civilisation' and 'tradition' belong to the vocabulary of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe<sup>72</sup>. In Edward Said's formulation, "the liabilities of such essences

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<sup>72</sup> For a succinct history of the emergence of the concept of culture in Enlightenment Europe see Sartori, *Bengal*, pp. 26-30.

as the Celtic spirit, *négritude*, or Islam are clear: they have much to do with the native manipulators, who also use them to cover up contemporary faults, corruptions, tyrannies, as they do with the embattled imperial contexts out of which they came, and in which they were felt to be necessary”<sup>73</sup>.

According to this account, then, the history of anti-colonial thought in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century amounts to a dependence on a number of dichotomies; the ubiquitous distinction between tradition and modernity, amongst the most cited, is a product of the globalisation of categories whose origins lie in either in an exclusively European historical experience, or at best are a product of the European self’s attempt to explain its increasingly frequent encounter with the colonised Other. As a result, scholars have sought to expose the derivative nature of these essentialisms, of which the logic of authenticity is commonly understood to be an integral part. Al-Azmeh, for instance, has provided a genealogy of culturalism’s biological and metaphysical connotations, locating the “naturalistic morphology of history” on which it is based in the thought of such ‘anti-Enlightenment’ figures such as Burke, Herder, Renan and Spengler<sup>74</sup>. Underlining the similarity with which both nationalist and Islamist political thought makes use of the discourse of authenticity at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he writes

When we examine the Islamist picture of society, what we find is a concept in part closely modelled on a strain of Arab nationalist thought – that of *misr al-fatat* (Young Egypt) or the Syrian Nationalist Party: a concept that holds society to be

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<sup>73</sup> E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) p. 16. See also Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, p. 5.

<sup>74</sup> A. al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London: Verso, 1993) p. 26.

an organic bond without any internal differentiations capable of affecting its unity or direction... It is not surprising that the concept of *asala* has a central place in this theory that Muslims have predetermined characteristics... equipped with a collective spirit or *Volksgeist*<sup>75</sup>.

Regardless of where within European thought al-Azmeh might locate the specific origins of the term *asala*, it is clear that the dynamic by which it presents itself in Arab political thought is that of importation. Indeed, Hourani's classic account of the emergence of intellectual-political modernity in the Arab world in many ways takes this transfer from metropole to periphery as one of its central themes, the influence of the French historian François Guizot's development of the concept civilisation on the prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century proto-Islamist Jalal al-Din al-Afghani being but the most noted example amongst countless others<sup>76</sup>.

Whilst these arguments are compelling in their demystification of questions that present themselves as 'timeless' (such as that of the nation) they seem unable to account for the widespread success and persistence of such modes of thought, even up to the present day, some might argue. If the modern meaning of 'culture' and its conceptual relatives ('heritage', 'authenticity') are terms which before the 19<sup>th</sup> century were conceptually alien to the world outside Europe, what could possibly account for its persistence in theory, most especially amongst the ranks of those who self-avowedly sought to undermine Western hegemony in all its forms?<sup>77</sup> A tentative answer to this

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>76</sup> A. Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1962] 1983) p. 114.

<sup>77</sup> For the (still rather understudied) transformation of the Arabic term *thaqafa* (culture) around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century see A. L. Tibawi, "The meaning of ath-thaqafa in contemporary Arabic" in *Arabic and Islamic Themes: Historical, Educational and Literary Studies* (London: Luzac, 1976) pp. 286-92 and R.



problem has been suggested by Andrew Sartori, who argues that “before we can argue that culture represented a new category of thought in the modern world, we need first of all to recognise that *a new kind of object* must have come into existence *demanding a new concept* through which it could be thought”<sup>78</sup>. The object that the culture concept seems to denote so successfully is “a *historically determinate form of human subjectivity whose self-understanding is one of underdetermination and autonomous agency*”, one that becomes particularly salient in spontaneous consciousness as a result of the abstractions inherent in the commodity form; the result of the conflation of use and exchange value<sup>79</sup>.

Sartori argues that the conditions for the possibility of the emergence of this object that culture names in the non-Western world was the integration of the world economy through colonialism (chiefly through changes in the imperatives of production and the spread of wage labour), relegating discursive iterations of culture found in 19<sup>th</sup> century European intellectual production to secondary significance when it comes to explaining its global dissemination. Indeed if we are to take seriously Raymond Williams’ study on the emergence of culture as a category of criticism in industrialising Britain, one might come to the conclusion that the term was no more

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Schulze, “The Birth of Tradition and Modernity in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Islamic Culture — the Case of Printing” in *Culture & History*, vol. 16 (1997) esp. pp. 29-41.

<sup>78</sup> Sartori, *Bengal*, p. 47.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* For the argument which inspires much of this account see G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*; R. Livingstone (trans.) (London: Merlin Press [1923] 1971) esp. pp. 83-222, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”.

foreign to the colonised world at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as it was to the heartland of capitalist development<sup>80</sup>.

From this perspective, other than the term's intimate association with the concept of culture perhaps the most useful statement that connects the modern use of authenticity to the emergence of an autonomous subject is Adorno's reproach to Heidegger, whose investment in the concept represents for the former "a new Platonism which implies that authenticity comes in *the complete disposal of the person over himself* — as if there were no *determination* emerging from the objectivity of history"<sup>81</sup>. Although aimed at Heidegger's existentialism, Adorno's critique nonetheless shows how the relationship between the logic of authenticity and the discursive field of culturalism might be meaningfully grounded in their dual references to the sovereign subject of the Enlightenment; in both cases authenticity and culture name a certain autonomy that the subject enjoys over and above determination. This observation alone, however, does not go far enough in helping us suggest why Mroueh would choose to *work through* the concept of authenticity, rather than abandon it entirely. What I propose is that authenticity does not just refer to the underdetermination that culture aspires to and names, but to its *politicisation* in modernity; the replacement of God by the subject of reason as the transcendental source of modern authority, and the associated conceptions of popular sovereignty that accompanied this transformation. Authenticity is thus a mechanism by which modes of politics constructed around the sovereign

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<sup>80</sup> It is these observations that for Sartori — who draws on Williams' work — pave the way for the true 'provincialisation' of Europe; broadly speaking 'culture' was no more a meaningful category in the *locus* of its origin than where it purportedly exported it, dethroning the former from its status as the privileged subject of world history. | R. Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959) pp. xi-xviii.

<sup>81</sup> T. W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*; K. Tarnowski and F. Will (trans.) (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, [1964] 1973) p. xvii.

subject *authorize* or otherwise derive the legitimacy for political action. The formulation Mroueh and his colleagues offer, that of ‘authenticity as contemporaneity’ can thus be read as a way to ground political practice in a source distinct to that of the autonomy of consciousness.

## Culture and Authority

Whether in literature or in the field of jurisprudence, the premodern use of terms in Arabic derived from the root *a-ṣ-l* all refer to a notion of origin, or the quality of being approximate to one<sup>82</sup>. In *usul al-fiqh*, the authenticity of both the content of a prophetic saying and the chain of its transmission was essential to establish the authority of sources of legal rulings; in other words, it was a way by which action informed by a textual source of the law was validated by proving its divine sanction (often through reliable intermediaries)<sup>83</sup>. This conceptual content, however, was primarily expressed through the term *asl*. Its cognate, *asala*, which roughly equates to the *state* of possessing an origin, is overwhelmingly used in the description of individuals or groups and seems to gain greater purchase with the advent of modernity<sup>84</sup>. If culture names a certain subjective

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<sup>82</sup> Schulze, “The Birth of Tradition and Modernity”, p. 40.

<sup>83</sup> See W. B. Hallaq, “The Authenticity of the Prophetic *Hadith*: A Pseudo-Problem” in *Studia Islamica*, no. 89 (1999) pp. 75-90. The ‘pseudo-problem’ the author names relates to the debate over the authenticity of the *hadith* in *Orientalist* scholarship and not, of course, with regards to its status as a *topos* of Islamic legal theory. See, by the same author, *Authority, Continuity and Change in Islamic Law* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press) esp. pp. 24-120, on the emergence of *usul al-fiqh*, the divergences of the early *madhahib* and the consolidation of authoritative rulings. Indeed, an equally important source of authority that emerges as a corollary to the initial sacred texts is that of predominant *interpretations* of those texts. The centrality of the founder-jurist in the emergence of legal schools arguably mirrors the logic of foundation that underpins the religious tradition itself.

<sup>84</sup> As I intimated earlier, the emergence and transformation of this discursive field around culture — not to mention its relation to political theory and practice — remains quite seriously neglected. As I prepare for further research, I defer momentarily to Schulze, “The Birth of Tradition and Modernity” pp. 29-40.

underdetermination that becomes possible to imagine in modernity, authenticity is then the aspiration to this autonomy; a state in which action is legitimate by virtue of its embodiment of this new transcendent, self-evident truth. In other words, the reifying processes of capitalist commodity production generate a particular conception of the rational, self-fashioning subject, expressed through the concept of culture, and a key mechanism by which a politics is constructed *around* cultural independence is its elevation as a source of authority, expressed in the concept of authenticity.

The transformation of the concept of authenticity in Arabic around the turn of the modern age, from a means by which a text might be deemed authoritative in its connection to the divine to a descriptor of a *human* capacity to personify a transcendental essence mirrors the way in which Hannah Arendt describes the modern migration of transcendence from the realm of the divine to that of human beings. Arendt defines the wielding of authority as the commanding of action which cannot be reduced to either persuasion (reason) or coercion (violence). This was a problem that haunted Plato's *Republic*, but only found its proper articulation in Roman political thought, through the centrality it attributed to the city's founding. The figure of the Christian God was soon to replace this mythologised 'origin' with Christianity's transformation into a state religion in Late Antiquity, but the concept of authority would not regain its political significance until the advent of popular sovereignty<sup>85</sup>.

Arendt is not necessarily describing a dynamic that is specific to the history of Europe. Indeed, the temporary (yet long-lasting) replacement of authority with coercion is a phenomenon which is well documented in the premodern history of Islamic societies. At least discursively, the

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<sup>85</sup> H. Arendt, "What is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, [1968] 1993) pp. 91-142.

*khulafa' al-rashidun* (the immediate temporal and spiritual successors to the Prophet) derived their authority from their vicinity to the quasi-divine, and a large of Islamic political theory from at least the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards focussed on legitimating the *de facto* power of conquerors as divinely granted<sup>86</sup>. The end of the absolutist state was underpinned by the formal dethroning of God by reason in the Enlightenment. The principle of self-determination was as much a philosophical truth as it became, perhaps more gradually, a political one; first republican (Paine), subsequently anti-imperialist (Lenin). But Kant's injunction to 'dare to know' came hand in hand with the transcendentalisation of the subject of the Enlightenment, now endowed with an "sacred right" famously decried as the very theology it sought to destroy<sup>87</sup>. Man supposedly replaces God, but not on Man's terms; indeed, many have commented on the tendency of popular sovereignty to retain the trappings of divine authority. "Secularisation", Eric Santner writes, involves "the displacement of religion by politics as the central organising force of sociality and collective identifications but only insofar", he continues, "as this 'elevation' of politics above the

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<sup>86</sup> As can be found in the treatises of al-Mawardi (972-1058), al-Juwaini (1028-85) and ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328). See A. Black, *History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, [2001] 2011) pp. 88-90; S. Siddiqi, "Power vs Authority: al-Juwayni's Intervention in Pragmatic Political Thought" in *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2017) pp. 192-220, and A. K. S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) esp. pp. 138-152.

<sup>87</sup> See I. Kant, "An answer to the question: What is Enlightenment? (1748)" in M. J. Gregor (ed.) *Practical Philosophy: The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) p. 20, and the rejoinder: "Just as myths already entail enlightenment, with every step enlightenment entangles itself more deeply in mythology. Receiving all its subject matter from myths, in order to destroy them, it falls as judge under the spell of myth. *It seeks to escape the trial of fate and retribution by itself exacting retribution on that trial.*" in T. W. Adorno & M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*; E. Jephcott (trans.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1947] 2002) p. 8. Emphasis added.

confessional affiliations and practices of subjects is itself sustained by theological values and concepts”<sup>88</sup>.

Is it possible, then, to think of the development of the concept of *asala* into part of vocabulary of popular sovereignty in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as neither the product the inability of Arab political thought to think past the constraints of religion nor the colonial imposition of a strand of German Romanticism, but rather in keeping with the theological impulses of Enlightenment thought *itself*, concerned as it is with the reconstruction of a transcendental source of authority in the figure of the autonomous subject? Dismissing the question of authenticity entirely, as intellectual historians of the Arab world have all but called for, ignores the fact that at its heart lies a problem that in modernity is fundamentally unresolved: what, if anything, must guide political action in the “modern destruction of guaranteed symbols of authority”<sup>89</sup>? For Mroueh, the answer to this question is, at times, Marxist ‘science’; indeed, the subsumption he stages of the history of medieval Islamic philosophy into the universal conflict between idealism and materialism is analogous at some level to accounts that read the ‘Abbasid period as an exceptional expression of the Arab genius or spirit. He is at times (or perhaps often) guilty of the very transcendentalisation that his rejection of culturalism helps us see. But there are instances where he goes beyond himself, or at least moments where his thought breaks free from what may — or may not — have been his explicit intentions. By way of conclusion I will offer an interpretation of the quality of ‘contemporaneity’ that Mroueh prescribes for the Arab movement for national liberation, taking

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<sup>88</sup> E. L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) p. xii.

<sup>89</sup> N. Bou Ali, *Psychoanalysis and the Love of Arabic: Hall of Mirrors* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 18.

as a premise his wish for it to understand itself as contemporaneous, which he equates with the state of being authentic. How might the reading of authenticity as denoting the authority of the autonomous subject help us understand the political kernel of Mroueh's work?

## **The Time of the Political**

When attempting delineate the relationship between Freud's thought and politics, Mladen Dolar draws a distinction between modes of thought that seek to answer the questions of classical political philosophy or deal with analyses of the configuration of power and institutions and those that, on the other hand, limit themselves to pointing to the coordinates in space or time in which politics might even take place. This site, termed 'the political' is distinguished from a positive, prescriptive politics; it is understood as a field of possibility that accompanies and emerges with the "dislocation of the existing social entities" whose immanence Freud identifies in the impossibility of complete identification between the individual and the group in his famous text on *Group Psychology* (1921)<sup>90</sup>. The possibility of transformation underpins libidinally-tied social relations because the process of identification between an ego and a love-object is driven by a logic which defies stabilisation or homeostasis; a surplus always seems to arise 'beyond the pleasure principle', to take another of Freud's famous dicta. The political is thus inscribed in the ability of unconscious processes to shift "the ground of what holds the existing relations together"<sup>91</sup>; it is understood as the space that that is opened by the inherent instability of the subject's attachments.

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<sup>90</sup> M. Dolar, "Freud and the Political" in "Freud and the Political" in *Unbound*, vol. 4, no. 15 (2008) p. 26.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

Mroueh's prescription of contemporaneity is interesting in that it suggests his statements fall into the same typology of that of Freud's; his *naza'at* can be read not as a prescription a course of action for the movement for Arab liberation, as it seems to circumscribe the contours of the political for it. Being contemporaneous for Mroueh and his colleagues involves a self-recognition by a group or individual as being determined by and expressing the contradictions that characterise any given present. This present, as with the past, is not one of stability, but is rather punctuated by the possibility of change, as is made clear from Mroueh's schema of historical development and transformation. In this sense it is possible to read contemporaneity as the recognition not just of the determination of consciousness by a social formation; the relation of dependence suggests the former's constant potential for dissolution and reconstruction given the inherent change that characterises social structure. Authenticity now seems to be the recognition of this present which both determines *and* actively undermines itself, opening the possibility for political action. The true subversion of equating contemporaneity with authenticity is thus laid bare: politics cannot preserve tradition, nor can it strive for progress; these are the illusory promises of subjective autonomy which are themselves a product of the very contradictions that render the present poised for transformation.

If it is too ambitious to probe the intricacies of Mroueh's view of subjectivity, the significance of his broadly-defined presentism can at least be oriented towards the dominant ways the history of anti-colonial thought has been discussed, especially in recent years. The form of Mroueh's presentism does not only allow him to critique the metaphysics of the past and future-oriented politics of his time; it also serves as a potential reminder that the excavation of the alternative 'horizons of expectations' of anti-colonial thought against the "flattening of anti-



imperial politics to nationalism”<sup>92</sup> might not lead to the uncovering of modes of thinking that represent such a radical break with nationalism after all. For does any ‘vision of the future’ not belong, at the level of the subject, to precisely the same kind of essentialism that cultural nationalism mobilises? Does it not presuppose the meaningful continuity of a subjective position between past, present and future that Mroueh’s work at its most developed rejects? In exchange for this deferred and determinate promise of complete emancipation, Mroueh offers something less grandiose yet seemingly more attainable; the alluring possibility for change that lies in the immanent instability of the social bond.

In this sense, Mroueh’s vision — at least theoretically — is not that of a ‘futurity’ that emancipatory politics should aspire to; to do so would involve the invocation of a privileged subject of history from whose standpoint the future would be intelligible; be that ‘man’, ‘progress’ or ‘science’. In this sense Mroueh arrives at the same privileging of the present as the thinkers and theorists whose work Fadi Bardawil recovers in his recent study; in his own way Mroueh stresses the political ‘particularity of his present’, by suggesting that political action should be guided by the opportunities and openings each moment is loaded with, although this impulse, as is hopefully clear by now, cannot be straightforwardly grouped under the heading of the ‘Arabisation of Marxism’<sup>93</sup>. Moreover, both accounts work against the idea of the inevitability of change, though difficulty in reading Mroueh remains the differentiation between the moments in which he is most properly beholden to dominant theoretical trends (Soviet progressivist historicism) and those where he can be read as their critic.

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<sup>92</sup> Goswami, “Imaginary Futures”, p. 1462.

<sup>93</sup> Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment*, p. 14.

The process by which I have sought to explicate Mroueh's claims in the introduction to his *naza'at* and their historical significance has itself generated a number of questions that might now be stated more explicitly. Rather than accepting the dominant narrative of crisis and derivation which haunts the story of Arab intellectual production in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, how can the work of Arab thinkers be mobilised in the interest of unmasking the concepts — such as culture, authenticity and tradition — that are they themselves are judged to be wielding uncritically? In other words, what revisions of the history of these concepts do thinkers such as Mroueh encourage, and what new readings of these thinkers do these conceptual revisions generate? More broadly, how does grounding the vocabulary of political modernity in the Arab world in *global* transformations such as the attempt to transform the autonomous subjectivity into a source of transcendental authority suggest fruitful avenues of research into the relationship between politics and metaphysical thought in the Arab world beyond the classic dichotomy of the religious and the secular?

Mroueh's unwillingness to depart from authenticity as a political concept prompted this revision of the way in which it has been discussed in the historiography of Arab thought. Unsatisfied with its dismissal as an imported concept — and thus as fundamentally unrelated to more 'pressing' political concerns — I demonstrated its relation to the quintessentially political concern with authority. *Asala* is no empty signifier; it denotes an object whose emergence is at the heart of the experience of modernity. I hope that this brief detour into the conceptual history of the vocabulary of modern Arab politics will prompt further investigations into the substance of this discursive field, and away from the equation of the 'modern' with the 'foreign'.

These concerns emerged when attempting to explain Mroueh's concepts, primarily *turath* and *asala*, and the way the author turns them against the systems of thought he borrows them from by exposing what lies underneath. By doing so, this study has established the significance of

Hussein Mroueh's work beyond his prominence as a leading member of the Lebanese Communist Party and editor of the journal *al-tariq*. Rejecting the dominant impulse to read Mroueh as a nationalist, a decision in part informed by a reading of the changing contours of political thought and practice in the wake of the defeat of 1967, I have sought to explicate Mroueh's interest — primarily conceptual — with the problem of *turath*, which he simultaneously engages and critically subverts by demonstrating the historicity of the term itself. I have suggested that this exercise Mroueh engages in, that of demonstrating the determination of forms of thought — their historicity — including that of the categories he employs in his study, can be read as a way of undermining modes of politics dominant at his time that took as their starting point the autonomy of consciousness over determination, and their construction of this autonomy as a form of authority in response to the erosion of transcendence in modernity through the concept of authenticity (*asala*). A final observation is that my investigations have pointed to the fact that the construction of a notion of authenticity distinct from that used by nationalists, Islamists and liberals alike was clearly a *collective* engagement, as Mroueh's concerns can be traced to the work of Mahdi 'Amil and Youmna el-'Eid; itself important evidence to support further elaboration and study of the 1970s as a moment of theoretical fertility and experimentation with markedly different concerns to those of more dominant trends in the history of political thought in the Arab world.

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