

The 2003 Arab Human Development Report, A Critical Approach

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The 2003 Arab Human Development Report : a critical approach

It is an embarrassing task to comment upon such an impressive piece of work as the Arab Human Development Report 2003, which is the outcome of the collaboration of highly esteemed Arab thinkers of various countries and backgrounds. This comprehensive attempt to describe the Arab reality, within the framework of a selected theme, this year that of knowledge, has to be lauded for its honesty and courage to denounce, without complacency, the setbacks and loopholes of development in the Arab world. But it is a challenge to try to deliver relevant and useful comments on all statements and analysis given in this report, precisely because of its wide range of approaches, and at the same time because of a number of concrete cases that could be cited to support, modify or deny the conclusions of the chosen global approach.

In addition to this, it may seem too easy, for a European scholar who enjoys a stable academic position, in a country where freedom of thought, speech and writing is largely guaranteed, to employ academic criticism where the destiny of millions of human beings is at stake. It might look like a mere intellectual exercise, and perhaps even as an attempt to destroy and deny the validity of the efforts of genuine and sincere colleagues to serve their people in enlightening them by sharing their analysis.

So the first obstacle to overcome is the dilemma between either to deliver a sympathetic or compassionate comment on the difficulties shown by the figures, datas and analyses that are gathered in the report, and cheering the enterprise that should contribute to the information of the leaders and help them to correct what wrongs might be identified, or to tackle the matter without taking into account anything but the sheer accuracy of the discourse on development that is the implicit guideline of this volume, and try to confront it with his own approach : that of an European, and more precisely, of a French background, which is by no means the only reference for the following comments, which are not only the product of a national culture, but of personal views matured along a professional long presence, study and work in every part of the Arab world.

Thus, knowledge has been aptly selected as a key to development and as a pre-requisite for the access to individual freedom and dignity. In short, after lengthy developments of the factors contributing to a knowledge-based society, the report concludes that there has been a large-scale failure of the Arab world in achieving this goal. In my view, it can not be disputed that the status and role of knowledge face severe shortages, but I am of the opinion that the root causes of the problem are not always as accurately addressed as its manifestations. What is more the remedies are, sometimes too easily or simply, sought after in a western mode of thinking and in western technological advances, which appear to carry as a side (and perhaps main) effect the reinforcement of western and more specifically US influence on Arab societies. To start with, a simple question could highlight the contradiction contained in such an endeavour : to whom is this report addressed ? What is it meant for ? The Arab public doesn't need such a report to discover what it knows all too well, the pitiful situation of knowledge in its society, and the reasons for this situation. That is, first of all, the refusal of the leaders to let culture and knowledge flow in to their countries.

The Arab world as a framework for a developmental study : is it relevant ?

An important preliminary question can be raised about the relevance of adopting the Arab world as the proper frame of this type of development study. This amounts to privileging a

particular aspect of cultural unity over others, that would give precedence to the elements of diversity of the same gathering of peoples.

The idea of a so-called “Arab Development” assumes that there is an Arab identity that involves peculiar features, and that these may have an influence on development. This is, that an Arab cultural pattern, in its essence, can be accurately considered as providing the ground for economic and political developments. This is a view widely shared in the Arab world itself, since the second half of the XXth century, which witnessed the growing influence of ideological views of movements claiming the unity of the “Arab nation” as a self-imposed goal which would heal the dividing wounds of colonialism, and the solution to the problems of a newly independent Arab world. Now, this ideological premiss, despite its failure in achieving political unity, gained new support based on quite questionable neoconservative US-sponsored *Weltanschauung* best summarized in a much publicized book (Huntington,), which sees the world divided into several “great civilisations” that are definitely separated by strict boundaries. In the same way as the “Arab nation” as defined by the promoters of Arab unity, depicts the Arab culture as being composed of fixed, a-historical elements. This leads to consider that Arab culture is based on so-called “traditional” values, inherited for instance from a mythical Beduin way of life, cradle of purity, as opposed to “modernity”, which amounts to the negative imports of cultural mixity, as a result of foreign domination and technological progress. But Arab culture should not be seen in an anachronic way, by vesting it with an a-historical essence and unity. Just as any other culture, Arab culture is the result of a mixture of foreign influences as well as it has influenced others. Therefore it is diverse and can express opposed views, which are not at the service of any cause, not even that of Arab nationalism or Arab Unity. This diversity is a valuable and useful tool for progress. Sadly however, this doesn’t seem to be sufficiently admitted by the writers of the report, who for instance use both the concepts of “tradition” and “modernity” without precise definition and proof.

Beware : statistics !

In the report, the authors avoid the debate about the content and meaning of the term “Arab” by referring only to the statistics and references produced within the spatial boundaries and the political frame of the Arab League. This leaves to the side qualitative interpretations, such as the definition of an Arab culture, if it is admitted that something close to that, from a scientific point of view, actually exists, in favour of quantitative data provided by official statistics... If language is selected as a major indicator of cultural belonging, it can be reminded that these boundaries do not fit with those of the practice of Arabic as a mother tongue, that they include a wide diversity of linguistic languages and dialects, Arabic being by no means the sole language spoken in most of these 22 countries, and even not the most practiced in some of them. The reference to the search for Arab integration, based on an assumed common culture, religion and history is also worth questioning, with an objective look at the reality of inter-Arab relationships in all fields. Arab identity and selfconsciousness has developed only since the end of the XIXth century, in certain intellectual and then political circles. It has only gained a wide audience and a political expediency from the years 1940’s onward, following the model of European nationalism in the XIXth century, and of the Turkish resurgence within the Ottoman Empire. If the 11th of september and the invasion of Iraq are to be viewed as the hall mark of the end of that period of time, it would be worth questioning the validity of the concept, in view of the threats of globalization on the one side, and of the strengthening of other identifications that defy the sole reference to the Arab State, as part of a wider Arab nation in the making, on the other side.

In order to support their statements, the authors rely to a large extent on statistics produced by official bodies, that are aimed at presenting comparative data between Arab States. Exclusive reliance on indicators is indeed a warrant of neutrality and objectivity in the analysis of social and cultural trends in the Arab societies, but it may also indicate a lack of direct knowledge and understanding of the larger segments of the population by the intellectual western educated elite. One should also keep in mind the fact that figures are just an illusion of objectivity, since the choice to measure a factor or another is a political one, tending at giving a certain image of a society, and since on the other hand, figures are never the exact reflection of reality and that they can be biased either on purpose or by lack of means to ensure the reliability of the counting. To give just an example, the absence of data on poverty, let alone of the human and social significance of poverty, in the Arab world, shows an absence of in depth thinking on this important but complex question within the Report.

The weaknesses and biases of the statistical apparatus constitute therefore an important part of the problem that is central to the report. While Arab countries have set up "Central Statistics Bureaus", that employ large numbers of often idle civil servants, the Censuses and reports that are issued by them are often defective, and do not serve the purpose of giving an adequate image of the society ; so they are not used as a tool for decision, in the political or in the development field. This is not entirely the fault of the administration, but also of the decision-makers or investors, whose rationale is not of a technocratic nature, but obeys to various personal or social considerations. Statistics are therefore considered as a concession to the western approach of planning : the case of Lebanon, which is at the first rank of the Arab world for its intellectual and technical abilities, is often cited, because it didn't hold any population census since 1932, in order to hide the truth of the religious divide and to keep its political system based on a decade-old lie, instead of tackling in earnest the problem posed by the demography, if there is any. By so doing, Lebanon is unable to properly solve the problems on unequal development, of population movements, etc., that is in short to settle the root-causes of the internecine fightings that ended in 1991. But nobody seems to really bother about the negative effects of this piece of Lebanese folklore, which doesn't hamper buoyant business and political games. It is therefore doubtful that these data, and this quantitative approach altogether are keys to a better understanding of the Arab Human Development, the more so as knowledge is the central theme of this year's report.

The general tone of the report, quite pessimistic, suggests implicitly that the Arab society would still be in the state of darkness, which evokes a – perhaps unconscious - religious reference to the pre-islamic *jahiliyya*. This reference is not as innocuous as it seems, because it might involve the belief that, as in the case of the *jahiliyya*, some divine Revelation could open the bright sky of knowledge, without human effort and by the grace of God. The Islamist trend, basing itself on the same analysis of the present situation, gives a different answer, that is that the only valid knowledge is the one that can be extracted from the reading of the Sacred book, and that all cultural links should be cut with the western world and the materialistic values it is accused to carry. But the Arab world is obviously not void of knowledge, and the progress in the last decades, in terms of alphabetisation as well as higher education have been tremendous.

The progress toward a knowledge society

Several information can be gathered throughout the report, that show the indisputable progress in the field of knowledge that have been achieved in the Arab States during past decades. The term of knowledge is perhaps not the most accurate to identify this progress, which more accurately registered under the headlines of education or culture.

A striking change in the Arab countries is the overall spread of education since independence. In every country, the State has devoted large budgets to ensure a mass education at the primary and secondary levels, and dozens of State universities have opened not only in the capital cities, but also in the provincial headquarters, ensuring access of the majority of the young generation to modern education. An important and rather surprising feature of this education is the equality of access for boys and girls, that has been promoted and achieved by different means, according to the prevailing cultural background. This leads to two main commentaries : the first deals with the importance given to education by all Arab governments, whatever their political stand, and the second with the high demand of education by families.

Modern education has been considered as an achievement of nationalist, socialist and progressive revolutions and coups d'Etat of the 50's and 60's, after the frustrations of pre-independence where education was restricted to a bourgeois elite ; it was seen, more generally, as a way to provide the new states with technocratic and bureaucratic cadres to achieve and channel development efforts. But it also responded to a high demand in Arab societies, where education is highly valued, to the point that one could almost speak of a "religion of the diploma", before all the PhD. This stems to some extent from religious and cultural inducements, but more concretely, it is reinforced by the need to migrate to be able to make a living and support a family (in mountainous areas of Algeria, Morocco, Oman or Lebanon, remote hinterlands like the Egyptian Saïd, Southern Tunisia, Nubia, etc.), by the strong prejudice against manual or technical work in the Arab society, or by the monopolization of the more lucrative fields of activity, and those linked to power, by small segments of society, thus excluding the mainstream of youth from some rewarding professional activities. Last but not least, uncertainty of life and future have conducted some people, like the Palestinians, to reinforce a traditional openness toward study in order to cope with an unforeseeable future.

Arab societies' focus on education can also be witnessed in rural and nomadic tribal groups, who, despite the hardship of their life and the mobility that is not proper to continuous study, have always respected "men of learning" and shown positive response to economic development opportunities. This should help us to counter cultural prejudices sometimes expressed in the Report, that would to some extent consider these societies as guilty for their pretended "backwardness".

It is true that this tremendous progress made in the field of education for all layers of the society has come to a standstill in the past 20 years, with the structural adjustment policies that led the States to limit their commitment in the field of social development, while the *open door* policy allowed for the blooming of private schooling institutions, from the *kindergarten* to the University. This has drastically reduced the access to a good education for the larger segments of society : while the rich enjoy an increasing chance of acquiring modern financial and technological knowledge, the middle class and the poor, that cannot afford to pay the fees of private schooling, see their chances of social upgrading through schooling annihilated.

Primary education, for instance, is still too often confined into inculcating the children with nationalistic-chauvinistic ideas, instead of inducing ability at independent thought ; any reform should tend at reversing its goals, and shift from propaganda to the learning of criticism and self-criticism, based for instance on the teachings of Arab thinkers and intellectuals throughout the ages, including modern writers, poets, essayists, etc.

So global figures, as given in the tables of the Report, which don't take into account the quality of teaching, miss a critical point of evaluation. Moreover, this privatization of education, along with US practices and inducements, may be the cause, in the Arab world, for the growing split between layers within society : in recently founded states, public education is a vital vector for promoting national and civic values and shared social behaviour. On the

contrary, the ideology that is supported by private institutions is one of a purely material, opportunistic and profit-oriented teaching, vehiculating western values and fashions and cultivating the *American dream* in contrast with local social and economic difficulties, thus preparing the younger generation to turn to emigration as the sole way to escape their societies' problems.

The report asserts in its conclusion that "Free flows of knowledge within society require a democratic value system and the elimination of corruption" (p. 143). This assumption can lead to a passive behaviour, since it rejects all hope of cultural progress as long as democracy and honesty are not established in the heart of the Arab political systems. First of all, knowledge can be acquired by other means than "free flows", which is a rather quantitative and idealistic approach. Nowhere is the flow of knowledge completely free, contrary to the assumptions raised by the "society of information". Dictatorships, autocratic regimes have sometimes given birth, unwillingly, to flourishing cultural movements and creation, and the contradictions raised within society by such regimes can have positive effects on the intellectual and moral maturity of the population, as is shown by the tsarist or communist regimes in Russia alike. Even prisons in the Arab world, be it in Morocco for progressist activists, as well as from Nasser to the present day in Egypt for the islamist political prisoners, have been termed by their former inmates as "the best universities" and the last pockets of freedom in the atmosphere of fear and abuse reigning outside. So knowledge can flow in, or be generated from inside, even in the absence of democracy and under the rule of corruption, thus helping to relieve the pressure and possibly helping to bring an end to such regimes that prevail today. The access to Internet could help enforcing that free flow, if not in an absolute way, at least with a noticeable difference with the pre-Internet situation. Human Rights activists are now openly present in Syria, in Saudi Arabia to name but a few countries, and the link they maintain with migrants or other organizations abroad, through the Internet, is at the same time a protection for them as well as a means to publicize the internal situation. Technically and politically, it is difficult for the security apparatus to control that flow of information. So the report shifts between an unduly pessimistic view, and an a contradictory adherence to the mainstream opinion that Internet is the sole key to knowledge acquisition, in a world turned into a Global Village. So, before reaching the conclusion cited above, the way the problem is presented in the Report leads mainly to suggest technical and financial solutions, without exposing the logics at work, that are highly efficient to maintain the power grip of the ruling groups, under the umbrella of their western protectors.

Knowledge and development : where is the missing link ?

The report seems to have adopted a narrow understanding of "knowledge", reducing it to the acquisition and mobilization of knowledge that is useful for development, i.e. for modern economic activities. But is really the link between knowledge and economic structure one of causality ? The postulate that an increase in knowledge would automatically lead to a sounder economic structure is doubtful.

The peculiarity of Arab economy today is its concentration in the hands of a handful of tycoons in each country, that gather political access and business interests acquired through the diversion of public money. This primitive way of accumulating capital doesn't favour the reinvestment of profit in new enterprises, that could give an outlet to university graduates, technicians and professionals. In this mode of development in dependance, there is no need for a "knowledge society", if this is supposed to mean a society that favours young entrepreneurship, that shows openness to new ideas and new activities. On the contrary, and this goes against the credo of the World Bank or the European Union expressed in the conclusions of the Barcelona Conference in 1995, this kind of economy, closely controlled by

foreign companies through their local agents, is fearful of new intruders, and of a leakage from technical or scientific progress to new political and social ideas, that would endanger the present encompassing system based on tribalism, sectarianism and the so-called *wasta*. The ignorance or neglect of this character of Arab economy explains why the whole MEDA plan of the European Union toward the Arab countries have miserably failed. So the vague term of knowledge is finally covering only the acquisition of imported “New Technologies of Information and Communication”, as opposed to the whole set of knowledge that is likely to shape the human being as an autonomous, free individual, part of a mature and closely knit society. Therefore the aim of building a knowledge society, as it is understood here, goes not through a continuous transmission of learning from elder to younger generations, or through manifold exchanges with foreign cultures, thanks to the new information and communication means at disposal. The report deals mainly with sending youth to the western world, in order to acquire technical expertise. Thus, the tool is privileged over the content, although it has more to do with profitability of investments, grandiose projects of Internet Cities, than with the progress and opening of the minds and development of creativity. Arab leaders and investors hope to achieve development without releasing the fences that imprison the minds of their people, but they should perhaps think more in depth about the conditions of the success of the Silicon Valley in California, for instance : like the *start-ups* of the primary wave of Internet, discoveries and progress were achieved by liberal and marginal youth, that were not primarily motivated by financial gains, and the model of concentrating the e-industry in one place that some Arab countries think of adopting, is now abandoned where it was born. The difficulties raised before young Arabs to complete their study in North America after 11th September is presented as a major loss to the acquisition of knowledge in the Arab World. Such a statement is in many ways disturbing : first, it refers to a privileged minority of Arab students (of whom quite a few are registered in some US Universities that are no more than PhD diploma supermarkets, with no serious academic credit) ; second, it expresses the conviction that no other education can be acquired in order to be able to face the challenges of the modern world, than the one given by western and specifically US Universities. This shows a deep state of self-contempt by the Arab thinkers themselves, since this mental polarization, if confirmed, doesn’t seem to them to be a catastrophe that should be remedied in the first place. And one may wonder what is the use of the so many so-called private “universities” that are sprawling all over the Middle East those days, adorned with impressive American names ? In fact, as an impartial foreign observer, one could observe that this self-criticism is not supported by any real comparison between Arab and western universities, nor by the prior establishment of criteria about what higher education should provide, as background and qualifications. An in-depth inquiry into these points could bring interesting and unexpected information about the potential of Arab Universities. Those have been given the base to provide proper levels of teaching ; their main defects lie, in our view, in the mode of recruitment, selection and orientation of students, that is still often based on family financial capacities, social connections, or social rewarding images of the academic fields, without taking into account the real interest of the students and of the society as a whole. Materialistic obsession and lack of vision for the future in Arab societies are there, like in all other fields, the main obstacle to social progress in the Arab world.

Rentier State and development

So while the link between knowledge and development has nothing automatic, the link between external domination and the inner political structure is more obvious, the more so that the political and economic system of rentier states like most Arab countries privileges importers over national producers. Rentier states induce a rentier mentality, which is leading

to a tendency to export capital, which is also safer and more profitable in many fields and respects, than to import Foreign Direct Investments. Those, be they emanating from foreign groups or from migrants, are kept at bay by a lack of transparency and of safety, more than by a sheer lack of profitability itself, due to the close and perverse link between power and finance in the Arab countries. The reference to the conclusions of a group like Transparency International are in that respect far from reliable, since this group aims at denouncing petty corruption, that helps poorly paid civil servants and employees to make a living, but keeps away from the “big money” corruption, that has become a rule in the passing of contracts between transnational firms and local governments. This “State corruption”, if widespread all over the world, is an essential feature of the functioning of Arab States. Still, no incantative appeal to foreign investments will be able to reverse the fact that the Arab countries are, on the main, not capital-attractive, but rather, on the whole, net capital exporters.

On the other hand, the lack of competitiveness of Arab economies is mentioned as a cause for the lack of attractiveness to foreign investments. The low productivity is part of it, which refers to the relationship of the Arab society toward salaried work. This can be explained by the economic factor of the oil rent, which has dismissed the social and moral value of salaried work. But the cultural factor, that has maintained in the Arab world a tribal and pre-capitalist social structure, is also at the root of social behaviour that explain the resilience of pre-capitalist modes of production and social relationships ; those concur to a better quality of life, in terms of social relations, than the one ensured in industrial countries by a higher financial income. Should this “deficit” in the exploitation of the workforce, to use marxist terms, lead to the conclusion that the Arab economy is not up to the world standart, since it doesn’t ensure the Wall Street imposed ratio of return on investment ? This all depends on the political position of the analyst ; let us only underline the fact that the use of economic data and aggregates fall short of taking the human and social reality behind them into account.

So insisting on an educational system geared solely toward feeding the supposed needs of the labour market neglects the fact that the societal and political present pattern is not entrepreneurship-oriented, and that the rules of the game at the international level, between North and South, confine the Arab world to the role of provider of raw material and cheap labour. This leaves scope for a reassessment of the role of humanities to reshape the intellectual and moral architecture of the Arab society : opposite to what is generally argued, I would advocate that the main problem confronting education in the Arab world lies in the field of humanities, rather than technology and sciences. The only way to correct the shortcomings that are mentioned throughout the report, that is to help the individual acquire maturity and autonomy in regard to the social structures that are oppressing him, is to reform education and give space to the teachings of nationhood, of civism, of public morality, of equity and justice.

This leads to the question of the language of education : the Arab world is heading towards dualistic societies, where the masses are restricted to Arabic, while the western-oriented bourgeois layers of society have adopted English or French not only as their means of communication with the outside world, but even among themselves. This dichotomy is leading to individual schizophrenia, aswell as to a rapid cultural split within society, which leaves the concept of nationhood meaningless. But it also raises the question of the status of Arabic : Arabization is advocated by the authors of the report, but without exposing its difficulties nor its benefits. It rather seems to be a lip service to the imposed credo of Arabism, although it raises a serious question : no doubt, Arabic is as able as any western language to be the vector of modern thought and technology. But the experience of Arabization, as I could witness it in several countries, like Sudan in the early 80’s, or in french-educated North Africa, ended in a severe regression of the academic standarts and in an angry frustration of the students : the lack of skills of lecturers trained in foreign languages

could hardly be avoided, and should have been alleviated by the reliance on arabic textbooks and inter-Arab cooperation. This could have been solved in a couple of years ; but the absence of textbooks rendered the matter inextricable, especially when this policy was linked to a xenophobic dimension, as in the case of islamist Sudan. This ended in the leaders of some countries sending their offspring in European or US boarding schools, while condemning the larger part of the population to bear the brunt of a disrupted educational system.

So the damage caused by the lack of translation efforts, underlined by Brigitte Dumortier, is obvious : teaching in Arabic, cut from external cultural and scientific advances, has led to the closure of younger generations from western influence, but provoked an intellectual myopia which is the most noticeable in the Egyptian mass production of doctors and engineers. The outcome is all too well known : the strong appeal of islamist ideologies within those segments of (seemingly) educated youth.

So Arabic in itself is not at stake : other non-European societies, like those of the Far –East, do not command a high fluency in English, which doesn't hinder their impressive efficiency in the economic or cultural field. So the turning of the Arab “elite” to foreign education and languages should only be seen as a reflection of their disinterest for socio-political progress of their societies, and as part of the Arab inferiority complex.

Provision of funding and equipment is no substitute to freedom to think and debate freely about the present state and the future perspectives of society, and about the means to achieve them, which goes through personal thinking and free discussion, and access to literature, and first of all the reading of Arab thinkers throughout the ages.

The mythical “strategic vision”

This emphasis on freedom in education fits more or less with what is presented as the purpose of the AHDR series : to “crystallise a strategic vision by Arab elites through a societal innovation process that envisages the restructuring of the region from within, and in service of Arab human development.” But as this statement leaves one guessing what the “Arab elites” are, probably the intellectual group represented by the writers, that is those allied, coopted or tolerated by the ruling class, and what are the tools that could engineer, harness and channel the changes that are either imposed by outside financial institutions or political powers or demanded by internal emerging forces within the society, it may be that this “strategic vision” is nothing more than the motto of the old Comte in Giuseppe di Lampedusa's novel “The Cheetah” : “ Change everything so as not to change anything”, and aims at avoiding the overturn of these elites by helping them to adapt to new times.

These new times can be accurately described by the Arab region's loss of sovereignty, that has been accomplished by the US and their allies using the occasion of the 11th of September : the rulers are all, despite apparent differences in the preserve of their peculiar way of running their country on a day to day basis, closely submitted to external forces. So the AHDR can be seen as an alarm bell to whoever might read it and be effectively in charge of the future of the Arab countries.

Still, the strategic vision is shaped in a number of suggested reforms in all fields, which deserve a few comments : first, it calls for a “rigorous self-criticism” to bring about the needed reforms. But this self-criticism leaves aside the fact that the intellectuals, and foremost those involved in the writing of this report, are not disconnected from their material and social positions : Arab intellectuals and thinkers are “organic intellectuals”, heavily depending of the State for their mere survival, let alone their career and fortune, as long as they haven't achieved their common dream of being integrated into a western university or think tank, that would provide them with a living, a safety and a fame. So their suggestions for an overall improvement of the situation of the human development in the Arab world are influenced by

their background and their expectations, that carry western terms of reference as an ideal and tend to consider their original society as backward. In so doing, they are representative of an intellectual community that sees itself in the mirror of the West, to which they are linked by acquired values, ethics, behaviours and interests. So the Report is heavily influenced by a class-bound and cultural imported discourse, that refers to a North American rather than western European origin, and in its self-criticism itself, conceals as much as it shows from the social reality of the Arab world today.

Still, my critics should not be misunderstood : the situation of the Arab world, especially as far as younger generations are concerned, is so worrying that any intellectual attempt to improve it should be welcome. To measure the gravity of the phenomenon, one just needs to watch the queues of young people at the doors of western embassies in any Arab country. Whatever their skills and training, social or cultural origin, all youth are dreaming of obtaining a visa to leave behind all accumulated obstacles to a better, or simply meaningful and free life. Far from earlier migrations, these are not primarily or only motivated by the need to survive ; they are also the result of the opening of windows, that give means to compare, often negatively, the Arab world with other parts of the world, in all ways of life.

“Pure” religion versus ...?

Religion is often presented, especially by outsiders, as the main cause of the “backwardness” of the Arab world, and as an obstacle to progress and development. Whether this opinion is valid or not cannot be definitely decided (Rodinson), but as Brigitte Dumortier reminds us, the same debate applies to the other revealed beliefs, Christianity and Judaism.

The way the authors handle this sensitive matter is very telling : they establish a distinction between “pure religion” and another brand, that is not expressively defined, but suggests the existence and sometimes prevalence of a “wrong islam”, which refers to the religion being used for political purposes or with a political agenda. But this distinction is in itself a political stand, that repels other views as invalid in terms of fidelity to the divine word. The purity of religion is not defined either ; one may suppose that it means the containment of religion in the private sphere, which is not the intent of the Divine Revelation, nor the historical practice of Muslim societies. The same could be applied to other religions as well, and the idea of pure religion sounds strange, except perhaps if it should be applied to eremitic or monastic lives, voluntarily secluded from the world. It is true that this wording is now commonly used by so-called secular powers to convince their population to keep away from the islamic political trend, but it is definitely not a valid scientific categorization. Religion is and has always been practiced by human beings in a societal context that influences their understanding of God’s Divine Revelation. True enough, religious official authorities or even activists of secular background on both sides, may dare to decide what is the true or wrong religion. To put it simply, Al-Qaïda and Al-Azhar are face to face, in an endless mirror game, but without any spiritual nor wordly relevance, except of political expediency.

As a contribution to our topic, that is the relationship between Islam and knowledge, beside the well-known Coranic verses encouraging sciences and knowledge, and the celebrated historical contribution of the Arab world to human development, let us just remind that political islam, as a conservative trend, only gained its present appeal through the failure of secular states and their own manipulation by State security apparatus to crush the more progressive trends in the Arab campus, from Cairo to Algiers : this led to a backlash on the path toward intellectual and moral progress of the concerned societies. The pressure and intimidations to forbid other venues to knowledge has proved to be a direct support to the rise of Islamism, which could then be easily presented as providing a comprehensive and exclusive solution to all problems facing society. The report mentions the fact that the demand

for religious books far exceeds that of other written works ; that shows that the problem doesn't stem from the lack of funds or of literacy, but from state controlled education. The absence of censorship on the content of these religious books render them attractive and help people to fill the vacuum resented in the want for instruments to understand and explain the society and mankind.

If, as is said (p.167), progress can only be achieved through struggle, the fight of intellectuals in that respect should be two-fold : the fight against the instrumentalization of religion by political activists cannot be separated from the fight against so-called "secular" dictatorships, that pretend to be siding with western democracies on the path to progress and development .

Freedom, good governance, women's empowerment : the Cargo Cult of globalization

The authors establish a direct connection between democracy and human development. If we refer to other historical cases at the world scale, the link is not so obvious. If democracy is now widely considered as the paradigm of progress and modernity, it is mainly because of the failure of present autocratic powers in the Arab world to achieve anything like Human Development. But this assertion too would deserve some comments, since Tunisia or some Gulf countries are presented by the international media, as by some western qualified observers, as conciliating both, on the model of City states as Singapore or Hong-Kong, not to speak about China as a whole. It could be argued that economic growth is not to be confused with development, even if Human Development can be seen as partly achieved in those examples, in terms of education and health for instance. But democracy is more than the fair game of pluralistic elections. It entails of whole set of social rules and individual behaviours that the Arab world is on the whole still lacking (Salamé G.,). In short, the democratic pattern is based on the precedence of the individual over collective affiliations, be they tribal, clanic or sectarian. Still, to consider the autocratic ruling systems as an essential character of Arab mentality is a prejudice that evacuates the whole historical context of the setting up of those regimes. Patriarchal systems (see Box 7.1) cannot be accused as such as being opposed to progress and evolution, as can be demonstrated with the examples of the Confucian model in the Chinese societies, as well as on the northern shores of the Mediterranean Basin. Essentialism thus leads to ignore possibilities of change and exonerates the autocratic regimes that need to be removed, and that manipulate patriarchy for their own interest.

In fact, the Report resorts to the use of the term "freedom", which is quite vague and emotive, rather than to that of "democracy", which would refer to institutional and political structures and concepts. This is revealing of the double-sided approach of the report : on one side quantitative, data based and aiming at presenting an objective study, on the other quite emotional, referring to supposedly universal and unquestionable splits between "good" and "bad", thus evacuating the ideological backgrounds behind these concepts. This applies not only to "freedom", but also to "good governance", which behind its positive sounding, could also arguably be analysed as opposed to democracy, in the sense given to it by its promoters, that is the World Bank and associate international institutions : "good governance" is based on the idea that some dynamic groups within society should be associated to government, so that top-down policies could be balanced by and mixed with a bottom-up approach. The good governance is thus the one that would make the needs and demands of the citizens taken into account by the ruler, by selecting some groups (youth, women, entrepreneurs, NGO's and the like) and entitling them to a say in the running of public affairs. The benefit for the ruler is that this participation of some sectors of the society would help him to run smoothly public affairs and avoid violent upheavals or any defiance by the society, which are up to now frightening possible investors in the Arab world for that matter. The objection that could be raised against this new worldwide credo is that the groups invited to share a say in public

affairs don't emanate from any public legitimacy, such as granted by free and pluralistic elections, and are contradictory to the basics of democracy, that is an equal say ("one man, one vote") for all citizens, whatever their capacities and their opinions.

Women's empowerment is in that respect no more than a part of such a strategy. The assumption, that may be true, is that women being oppressed by men, they have a vested interest in adhering to such a change of rules, and that they are the more willing to implement reforms consisting in breaking "traditions", that is the pre-capitalist structures of a still patriarchal society.

But since the principle of good governance is imported from the North-American and North-Western European protestant model, it is alien to Arab society. So the governments, on which this ideology is imposed, manage to give an impression to the international institutions that try to promote it. A mock example of this façade changes is given in the paragraph on women's advancement, that mentions the increasing number of women ambassadors in the Arab world as an indicator of a progress in the fate of women as a whole ; indeed, the majority of Arab States are presently represented in France by female ambassadors. This token aimed at projecting a positive image toward western public opinion cannot hide a still very dark human reality ; on the contrary, it can help it survive untouched, through horrific social customs, like the "crimes of honor" in Jordan and elsewhere.

In dealing with good governance, the most risky attempt by the authors is to issue judgements and marks to the Arab governments for their achievements during the previous year on the arduous path toward democracy. Three national cases of progress in the political sphere are selected for year 2003 : Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Bahraïn. But the criteria that lead such a judgement are not fully explained, and seem based on the current dominant values, more normative and moral than anything else. It deliberately ignores the fact that US led-western domination on their rulers has become more blatant than ever, which applies also to decisions of political and social change. Promised reforms, like those of Crown Prince Abdallah in Saudi Arabia should perhaps not be taken at face value, without inscribing them in the international, regional and internal contexts that may indulge the rulers of these countries to make concessions to their people. Though, these concessions might not be wholehearted, but more likely opportunistic and reversible. One might for example imagine that, since the danger of islamic terrorism is now considered by the United States as the major threat in the area and at world level, democracy leaves the lead to political stability in the US agenda. Public opinion is often disappointed to have to content itself with cosmetic changes. It seems at any case rather idealistic to imagine that dictators could spontaneously turn into democrats. Again, democracy is before all a system of checks and balance, which is not provided for in the developments announced.

On the other hand, if three countries have been isolated to receive laudative comments by the authors, the four that have witnessed a worsening of their human rights situation are not named, which shows the shyness and the limits of this transparency exercise.

Terrorism and Democracy

This said, the "Arab Charter against Terrorism" can only be seen as a poor answer to the casual and widespread human abuse in the Arab world. The wording itself, again, suggests that the Arab States focus on the fight against terrorism as it is understood in western countries, heavily influenced by Israeli agendas and concerns, and indeed, it aims at curbing inner extremist, mainly islamist opposition, while also, in many countries, trying to suppress Palestinian resistance, in order to comply with US and Israeli demands ; but this can only be done at the expense of human rights, as can be seen in the systematic torture inflicted to political detainees in Egypt, for instance.

Not only is the fight against Terrorism run through wanton torture, assassination and arbitrary detention, but it has to be emphasized that these acts are not a regrettable deviance of the Arab political systems, they are on the contrary at the heart of those systems : behind the official political scene, how open or closed it might look, intelligence or secret services are everywhere the real power in charge of the control of the population.

So the security apparatus enjoys a large degree of autonomy, its power being based on its intimate knowledge of the personal, social and financial behaviours of the rulers ; it tends to develop its own way of handling the opposition, ending in setting its own goals as a professional grouping, opposed to any political opening.

Conclusion

Most of the above commentaries have been pinpointing the negative and defective aspects of the situation in the Arab world, in terms of human development. They have also tried to highlight the methodological weaknesses of the approach. But this should not diminish the merit of this volume. An extensive work has been achieved, and it has succeeded in putting together various datas and analyses to give a comprehensive and coherent view of the overall situation, in a comparative way. Let me just regret, once again, that the report relied more on delusive figures, than on the rich and diversified experience of the authors. Their ability to analyse concrete situations would, if it had been more exploited, have rendered a more accurate view of the complexity of present knowledge situation in the Arab world.

Trying to assess the changes occurred within one year, the “2004 executive summary” lists two setbacks and three development challenges “represented by the deficits in knowledge, freedom and women’s empowerment” : major events like the reoccupation by Israël of Palestinian territories, and the invasion of Iraq by an international coalition are recalled and can certainly be termed as major setbacks in regional politics ; but it is difficult to see how it can be objectively presented as a setback for the “Arab world”. This would imply that the Arab States actively share common interests and strategies in the region, which remains to be demonstrated : no Arab country, let alone the Arab “States community” took any concrete measure to prevent these two sad events to happen, and looking back to history, they may have been profitable and secretly applauded by some Arab leading circles. Not only is Arab cooperation not a pre-requisite to improve the status of knowledge nor the achievement of a higher measure of political participation, but on the contrary, the example of Al-Jazeera channel may indicate that competition and challenge is the best incentive to achieve progress within the Arab world, if we compare it to the poor achievement of the Arab League or the ALESCO.

If we turn to the three development challenges, it is all too easy to question the relevance of this particular choice at this particular time, and the accuracy of measurement of changes in social and political behaviours in such a short period of time.

As for proposals and solutions to the problems identified, they are mainly based on good will, which is assumed by the authors as the sole realistic key of positive developments : especially on the political scene, these developments might occur in some countries and not in others, according to the degree of enlightenment of political elites and rulers. But the simple lineary view of History developed here is hardly helpful to describe and analyse the social and political changes occurring in the Arab society. The same could be said about the use of the term “ community” to describe any social group : it implies a sense of common interest, behaviour and destiny which is rather difficult to assert in a society that is on the contrary, beneath the surface, noticeable for its internal splits of all sorts.

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