
Reviewing a book by Georges Corm is always both a delightful and a difficult endevour. The latest opus about contemporary Arab thought is no exception and comes as a logical sequel to his extensive work of articulating and deconstructing events in the Arab world. Having explained in previous works (Corm 1988, 2012) the fault lines in the political economic and social landscapes in the Arab world, it was only natural that Corm should review the intellectual spectrum that has shaped political, economic, and social movements and events since the 19th century and through to the 21st.

The book reviewed has been in bookshops since mid-April 2015 and comes at a moment when the Arab world is torn by major upheavals and wars defined by conflicting ambitions, ideas and worldviews, as well as by the festering problem of Palestinian statehood and spoiled rights by Israel and her international backers. Indeed, the purpose of the book, as the author states, is to show the lack of credibility of various theses and ideas developed in the West about the Arab world (8). The ideas found in the writings of so-called ‘experts’ or ‘academics’ have developed a rigid mindset about approaching issues in the Arab world that have led to significant misunderstandings and erroneous policies (8). The Arab world is much more complex and nuanced than described by the simplistic and reductionist narratives prevalent in the West. Indeed, the author wants to show his readers, Arabs and non-Arabs alike, the diversity and complexity of Arab thought regularly ignored in the Western media and in chancelleries. Unfortunately, we may also add in the Arab media that copies the Western narrative!

The book is divided into 14 chapters plus a foreword, an introduction and a conclusion. There is also an extensive bibliography, which in itself is already a value added since it relates to Arab authors hardly ever discussed in the West. At the end an index helps the researcher to find quickly the sections of interest, without the trouble of extensive reading. The book is well written in a crisp style that avoids redundancy. Corm is an important, if not a major, figure in the Arab intellectual landscape. Indeed, he has interacted with many of the leading figures of contemporary Arab thought, hence the personal narrative tone one finds in reading him.

Due to space constraints, the difficulty in reviewing Corm’s latest book lies in the need to choose from among the various thought-provoking topics and chapters it contains. Like his earlier opus Fragmentation of the Middle East: The Last Thirty Years (Corm 1988; 2012), this book is panoramic in its design. It reviews a wide spectrum of ideas and debates in the Arab world, in the realm of political ideas, religion, economics, art and literature. The book is, therefore, an important reference source, a
compendium of major currents that have and still dominate the intellectual sphere. This review may not do full justice to the book because of the selectivity and arbitrariness of the focus of the review given the wealth of information and analyses provided by Corm.

The introduction starts with a question: ‘Is there such a thing as Arab thought?’ The legitimacy of the question arises when one tries to understand why the Arab region is torn by civil wars, open wars (Yemen–Saudi war), and destabilization by regional and international powers. Corm asks bluntly, ‘Is Arab thought responsible for the current situation?’ (13). If the answer is ‘yes’, then is it due to its ‘sterility’ and does it invite violence? (13). His answer is ‘no’ and then he embarks upon the task of demonstrating the complexity, richness and nuances of Arab thought. He acknowledges its lack of visibility, especially in the West because of the latter’s fascination with Islam (14). It would appear that there is no other thought in the Arab world except Islamic and theological thought. In fact, the book aims to show that despite all stereotypes, despite the secular and religious authoritarianism, despite the wars and civil wars, critical thought has never been absent (16). Arab critical thought is still thriving as the narrative of the book shows.

Chapter 1 provides an outlook of the diversity of Arab thought. Corm distinguishes between Islamic civilization and Arab culture, even though they are intertwined. He emphatically insists upon that distinction in the second chapter in no uncertain terms (41). The roots of Arab culture precede Islam. The ‘Revelation in Arabic’ gave a significant boost to an already rich language. Yet other languages using the Arabic script developed and carried Islamic civilization into Central Asia. Languages were created using the Arabic script like Urdu in Pakistan. Persian and Turkish intellectual output was in Farsi and Turkish, yet using the Arabic script even though many Persians thinkers also wrote in Arabic. The latter was the language of civilization. The emphasis made by Corm is to distinguish between Arab and Islamic civilization.

Poetry and song were the vectors of culture then and now. They are dominant art forms and relate to the loved one, and to piety and rejection of all forms of injustice. Contemporary music and songs, such as composed by the great Mohammad Abdelwahab (1902–91), or Marcel Khalife, or by the iconic songstress Um Kulthum (1898–1975), or Fayrouz, or Farid el Atrash (1910–74) or Abdel Halim Hafez (1929–77), take their inspiration from the great Arab classics (30). They are still more popular than any political or religious leader across the Arab world. They are one of many indicators significantly representing the unity of the Arab peoples.

If Arabs are poetry lovers, they are also prose and eloquence lovers. Corm devotes several beautiful paragraphs (32–33) describing the hallmarks of Arabic literature. He also addresses the contributions made by Arab philosophy to human thought (34–36), especially in the social sciences such as those made by the famed Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406). Hence, Arab culture was able to grasp and assimilate other cultures of the Mediterranean, as well as from Asia (Persia, India) and produce a unique body of knowledge transmitted to humanity.

Chapter 2 addresses the complex issues relating to Arab identity and the vigorous and numerous debates that have occupied the Arab intellectual space. Corm starts by reemphasizing the need to distinguish between Arab and Islamic culture. Arab culture and history predates Islam and much of the confusion in the West owes it to the phrase ‘Arab Islamic civilization’ (42). Two Arab intellectuals have contributed to such confusion: the late, distinguished Arab historian Albert Hourani (1915–93) and Hicham Djait (b. 1935). Hourani’s masterly account of Arab history is mostly an account of Islamic history. Djait has equally promoted the concept of ‘Arab
Islamic civilization. In his anthropological approach to defining the Arab character, he suggests the ‘Arab Islamic’ character (42–43). In a sense, such works have led to more confusion and consecrated the fascination with the past (43). Corm proceeds to provide an account of the various debates about Arab identity and the fascination with the past. It is an excellent summary of what has occupied the Arab intellectual space for many decades and continues to do so to date.

Chapter 3 is a critique of traditional Western epistemology about the Arab world. He laments the lack of surveys of Arab thought whether in the West or in the Arab world itself. What is available revolves mostly about Islam and rarely about Arab thought (57). He lists two major problems handicapping serious research on Arab thought. The first is the weight of the anthropological approach in the West attempting to define the ‘Arab spirit’ or even the ‘Muslim spirit’ in order to determine the ‘other’ as compared with the European spirit (58). The second problem is the pointless and endless debates about the authenticity of Arab thought and the post-colonial impact on it especially in secular, feminist, nationalist and even Islamic movements (58).

Corm debunks the various orientalist approaches about Arab and/or Islamic thought essentially motivated in the 19th century by the need to justify the superiority of Western culture and denigrating Arab and Islamic culture. He reiterates the arguments he developed in deconstructing the racist thought of Ernest Renan he had undertaken in his earlier works (58).

Further into the book, Corm proceeds to a review of the conditions of intellectual and cultural production in the Arab world since the latter 20th century. He devotes a special section to Arab Christian thinkers. He laments how they came to be misinterpreted. At the beginning is the dichotomy between Christian Arab and Muslim Arab thinkers suggested by Hourani as well as by other distinguished Arab scholars like the late Hicham Sharabi (1927–2005). Such dichotomy is the result of the anthropological approach by orientalists who have significantly influenced Arab scholars (80). Sharabi believes that Christian Arab thinkers are alienated from Western thought, and Muslim Arab thinkers are too entrenched in Islam which renders the gap insurmountable. Corm expresses his consternation at such distinction (81), which he considers irrelevant and unjustified.

Chapter 4 is a description of the political conditions that have shaped Arab society such as the dismemberment of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Sultanate and the ‘three misfortunes’ of the Arab world (88). Such misfortunes are, first, the geographical and strategic position of the Arab world at the crossroads of three continents. The second is being the birthplace of the three monotheistic religions. Finally, the fact that the region is the largest reservoir of energy sources in the world has been and continues to be a major reason for domination and control by empires in the past and superpowers in the present and foreseeable future.

Among the factors that have shaped Arab societies is oil. It has provoked major transformations in Arab societies, many of which have grown dependent upon it (90). In fact, oil wealth has exacerbated the culture of rent in many societies, with disastrous results (91).

The Islamic revolution in Iran has also contributed to change in the Arab world. It has triggered an Islamic revival amplified by the frustrations and failures of modernization through Western and secular ideas and approaches. Many former Arab secular intellectuals expressed their regrets of their past ideas and converted to ‘Islamism’ as the only way to stop Western hegemony (93).
Chapter 5 discusses the sources of political and intellectual discord among Arabs. Indeed, the creation of the state of Israel had a profound impact on Arab thought (103). Furthermore, the lack of unity affected the intellectual landscape. Corm lists six factors contributing to the discord among Arabs. The first is the lack of experience of political elites (108). Second is the splintering of Arab states or their ‘balkanization’ in the aftermath of the dismemberment of the Ottoman Sultanate (109). The third and fourth factors are the Cold War and the ensuing hegemony of the United States over the Arab world (108). The fifth factor is the emergence of the state of Israel and the destabilizing effect this had on the region (108). The last factor is the disruptive irruption of oil wealth and oil dynasties and the negative influence of the culture of rent (110).

Corm raises an important and often neglected question: why did Arabs relinquish power after their splashing entry into world politics in the seventh century? (113). He lists several reasons that do not go beyond the realm of speculation such as the fact Arabs were a minority in demographic terms within the Islamic empire (114). Also inter-ethnic marriages between Arabs and other ethnic entities such as Kurds, Persians and Indians indicate that Arabs chose openness instead of exclusion, thus reducing the initial impetus of the conquests and relinquishing themselves to a minority status in the Islamic world. Corm points to other explanations by Arab scholars who used a Marxist approach, such as Fawzi Mansour, to explain the decline of Arab pre-eminence in power politics through inter-tribal conflicts relating to the succession of the Prophet. Another reason was the heavy burden of the property (real estate) tax that plagued the development of bourgeois capitalism (n. 113). A third possible reason was the political and military decentralization caused by the extensive conquests and acquired territories leading appointed rulers to yield to the local environment (114).

Chapters 6–9 are an account of the various events that have shaped the intellectual and political landscapes. From the Arab Renaissance or Nahda (Chapters 6 and 7), to the emergence of political parties and Arab nationalist movements (Chapter 8) and other forms of regional and Arab nationalism (Chapter 9), Corm provides a wide encompassing outlook that could serve as a reference to 20th- and 21st-century political developments. The value added is the rich bibliography and sources often complemented by interesting footnotes.

More importantly, are the pages (190–192) devoted to the Center of Arab Unity Studies (CAUS), one of the few privileged centres of Arab nationalist thought (190). To the best of our knowledge, Corm is the only Arab intellectual who has referred to CAUS and its enormous role and impact on Arab nationalist thought. He pays homage to its founding chairman and director, Khaireddine Haseeb, in the establishment of a network of institutions devoted to the promotion of Arabness and Arab nationalism. For that, this reviewer is tremendously grateful and proud. Yet, this reviewer cannot but express his regret at the scarcity of references to the publications of CAUS. The latter has produced and compiled an extensive list of reference books on Arab nationalism (over 800 titles), on the various issues that shape the Arab intellectual and political landscape – the very subject of Corm’s book. Is this due to a lapse or constraint considerations, as much can be written and shown in 335 pages! This unfortunate omission is more glaring when Corm fails to tackle the dialogue with Islamic movements initiated by CAUS since the late 1980s.

Chapter 10 addresses the impact of political failures on Arab thought, especially since the secession of Syria from the United Arab Republic (UAR). It is noteworthy that Egypt retained the UAR until the death of Gamal Nasser in 1970, and the shift
made by Anwar Sadat in re-labelling it the Arab Republic of Egypt. The secession has traumatized a whole generation of Arab nationalists and has led to the emergence of a new type of critical thought largely inspired by Marxism.

Chapters 11–13 tackle the emergence of contemporary Islamic political thought as a counterpart to Arab nationalism. Corm discusses briefly many themes such as the ‘dilemma’ between Arabness and Islam (231). He is quite critical of the narrative made in the West, yet it seems to this reviewer that he is not aware of the strides accomplished in that respect by Arab thinkers, scholars and activists. The tremendous work undertaken by CAUS from the 1980s to the present has gone a long way in settling the debate. Arabness is an identity and Corm correctly points out the importance of such an identity and refers to the various works by Arab scholars in that respect. Islam is, on the other hand, the main spiritual component for such an identity. What this reviewer may add in this respect is that the current rift between Arab nationalists and Islamists relates more to the issue of power and power-sharing than to deep ideological divergences. The rift among Arab nationalists relates to power and power-sharing issues. It is unfortunate that only few Arab nationalists have addressed the issue instead of focusing on ideological narratives that lead nowhere!

It is regrettable that Corm has not been able to review the enormous literature produced by CAUS in this respect, as well as the resolutions adopted by the Arab National Conference and the Arab National Islamic Conference. The Arab Renaissance Project is the ultimate output of discussions and debates for more than 20 years by the CAUS and the conferences. This reviewer expected Corm to give enough attention to the landmark conclusions reached by the various symposiums and dialogue between traditional Arab nationalists and Islamists. The new definition of the Arab nationalist is anyone who adheres to the Arab Renaissance Project (Hafez 2011). Hence, he or she could be one of the traditional Arab nationalist movements, or an Islamist, or a leftist/Marxist, or even a liberal in the Western sense. Arab nationalism has become inclusive of all currents and has overcome the original narrow definitions of Arabness relying on ethnic origin.

Despite this lapse, Corm addresses in Chapters 13 and 14 the attempts at establishing new liberal thought (264). In this context, he refers to the vivid intellectual debates among Arab thinkers such as Aziz el Azmeh and the late Abdel Wahab el Massiri on the issue of secularism (256–258). He equally points out to the efforts by Islamic thinkers in revisiting the reading and interpretation of the Text, the Hadith (or sayings by the Prophet), as well as the cultural legacy of pre- and post-Islam. In that regard, he has devoted several pages to my own work (Hafez 2012), for which I am thankful and appreciative (269–273). Corm also addresses the philosophical landscape with Arab luminaries such as Abdel Rahman Badaoui and Nassif Nassar. He equally points to the paucity of contemporary Arab economic thought despite the contributions of Youssef Sayigh (310) and Antoine Zahlan (315). In short, the Arab intellectual landscape is much richer than what the ruling elites in the West and largely in the Arab world seem to believe.

This book is a major addition to the Arab library. It is a pity that not more of Corm’s books are published in the Anglo-Saxon world because international readers would be well-served in including this work with the previous reference books produced by Corm.

References

The body of knowledge on the plight of Palestinian refugees is relatively rich (The Lancet 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013). Research on the relationship between Palestinian refugees and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), however, appears to be sparsely undertaken except for a few articles by scholars such as Al-Husseini (2010), Bocco (2009) and Takkenberg (2009). This lack of research is especially striking given that the Palestinian refugee population is one of the world’s oldest and largest, and the fact that UNRWA is one of the oldest UN agencies that was founded in 1949 to cater for the humanitarian and subsequently the developmental needs of Palestine’s refugees. The agency currently serves around five million registered Palestinian refugees. The book under review is therefore a much-needed study.

Based on a conference hosted by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut in 2010, UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees was edited and written by a cohort of both established and aspiring scholars. It is very timely, coming at a period of precarity for Palestinians – be they in Gaza, Syria or Lebanon. It is also a period when UNRWA is facing considerable challenges, be they organizational or funding related, or resulting from operating in a region currently experiencing uncertainty and upheaval.

The book consists of six main parts. Part I discusses UNRWA’s service provision role and the challenges it faces from lack of funding and changing internal management. Protection is tackled in Part II, where Mark Brailsford discusses how the concept is currently incorporated into UNRWA’s operations and planning. Part III looks into camps and their governance, and is perhaps one of the most important parts of the book since it delves into how Palestinian camps are managed and controlled. Kjersti Berg’s Chapter 5 in Part III comprehensively describes the history of building camps, and contextualizes it in the administrative and organizational environment in the corridors of UNRWA, as well as the political climate after 1948 and after 1967. This is indeed a very interesting historical analysis that is central to understanding the current challenges to liveability in the 58 official Palestinian refugee camps. Part IV addresses the subject of civic participation and community engagement and stresses the importance of refugees’ involvement in UNRWA’s strategies as a way to enhance trust