

Aziz Al-Azmeh

Politics, Memories, and Berlin



Born in 1947 in Damascus. 1973: Magister Artium in Philosophy with Islamic Studies and Political Science as minors, Eberhard-Karls University, Tübingen. 1977: Doctor of Philosophy in Oriental Studies, University of Oxford. 1980-81: Fellow of the Center for Near East Studies, American University of Beirut. 1981-83: Lecturer in Philosophy, Kuwait University. 1983-84: Research Fellow, University of Exeter. Since 1985: Sharjah Professor of Islamic Studies, University of Exeter. Publications: *Ibn Khaldun in Modern Scholarship*, London, 1981. *Ibn Khaldun: An Essay in Reinterpretation*, London, 1992. *Historical Writing and Historical Knowledge: Introduction to the Craft of Historical Writing in Arab-Islamic Culture*, Beirut, 1983. *Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies*, London, 1986. *The Politics and the History of 'Heritage'*, Beirut, 1987. *Arabs and Barbarians: Medieval Arabic Ethnology and Ethnography*, London, 1991. *Secularism in Modern Arab Life and Thought*, Beirut, 1992. *Islams and Modernities*, London 1993. — Address: Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Old Library, Prince of Wales Road, University of Exeter, GB-Exeter EX4 47Z.

Grim as it certainly is, Berlin is a city full of possibilities and of all-too-discreet charms. So discreet, indeed, that gaining expertise in the use of this city over and above what clearly comes to view in museum, theatrical, and musical listings requires some diligence, an instinct for urbanism, the capacity to induce in oneself the gaze of innocence, and above all the need to explore surroundings to the extent of assurance.

All this, clearly, requires energy and time and is fully as rewarding as the strictly academic work which constitutes the public mission of the Wissenschaftskolleg. Acquaintance with Berlin is enriching, aesthetically, politically, and personally; one has the sense of accelerated learning as one does in all transitional situations and periods of interregnum, and I have, like many others, benefited much from living in this city at this time, before it is again taken over by the imperatives and misfortunes of all capital cities especially constructed or reconsecrated as such.

Yet for all its waywardness, urban life in Berlin was not a distraction from work, or from the *Geselligkeit* of the Wissenschaftskolleg. I was particularly gratified at being able to entirely finish a book. For some time, I had been working on a study concerning the ubiquitous elements of sacredness in political power, elements subject to a rather perverse reverse sublimation in the secular world, all the while preserving the aura of distance. I studied most particularly traditions of rule, discursive, ceremonial, and magical, in certain historical experiences: in the ancient Middle East, especially in Hellenistic and Romano-Hellenistic times, in Byzantium, in the medieval West, and in Muslim traditions. Additionally, as a "control group" with less systematic ties of filiation, I studied Buddhist polities in Southeast Asia and Ceylon.

The result was a book with the title *Muslim Kingship: Empire and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian, and Pagan Polities*. It outlines the elements of the repertoire of imperial attributes, some of them ubiquitous and global, others specific to the Middle East and its European extensions: analogies and connections with the realm of divinity, metaphors in terms of matters divine, cosmic, and social, theories of authority, subordination, and superordination, legal institutes and regulations. Central to the book was the oecumenical institution of the caliphate as a paradigm which was duplicated elsewhere, in various forms and with numerous variations. Equally central was the vast movement of Eurasian unification under imperial authority and its attributes (duly noted, albeit in somewhat idiosyncratic terms, in Toynbee's *A Study of History*, as I found out recently) durably achieved only by the caliphate, which describes the twin movements of Persian expansion westwards and Alexandrian (and later, Roman and Byzantine) expansion eastwards.

The caliphal regime synthesized elements from the very ancient conceptual, magical, legal, and aesthetic repertoire of imperialism available, elements equally present in the Persian and Byzantine traditions; it islamized them, by endowing them, as all cultural appropriation proceeds, with Muslim names and genealogies; and it crystallized them in institutions, conventions, and traditions. This process was a long one; like architectural and legal distinctiveness, this required some four or five centuries before achieving forms that are today recognizable as classically Muslim.

There is a direct connection between this work and previous work of mine concerning the medieval as well as the modern Arab world. In conceptual terms, all this leads directly to certain efforts of a synthetic nature, concerning notions such as culture, civilization, religion, and history. Much of this general historico-philosophical and anthropologi-

cal reflection, and allied reflection against the organismic culturalism so much in vogue today, especially in the study of non-European histories, will be contained in a contribution to Professor Rösen's Bielefeld project on histories and cultures. Elements were contained in a keynote lecture entitled "History and Delivery from History" I read (in Arabic) last November at the annual conference of the Tunisian Historical Society in Sousse, held under the general title: "The Constitution of Historical Objects".

My presence in Germany this year opened my eyes to a field of research and reflection of the German contribution to which I had not been adequately aware of, namely, the theme of culture and memory, which is the general context of my recent readings. Thus, I took the opportunity to familiarize myself with the writings by Assmann, Koselleck, Rösen, and many others. I also read systematically according to a plan I had set myself, in the fields of the philosophy and anthropology of time, conceptions of the past and of cultural others and their cognates, all geared towards my general reflections on culture, memory, and history. Most saliently, all these themes converge towards a conceptualization and comparative historical description of the notion of tradition, and this is a matter I will address in Leiden next January.

Closely connected with these themes, albeit with a distinct thematic orientation, is my research and writing on modern and contemporary movements of revivalism, most particularly Islamist revivalism in the Arab World. I continued my engagement with this topic by organizing our 3-day international colloquium, on which a report is printed in this *Jahrbuch*. My book *Islams and Modernities* was discussed by a seminar at the Freie Universität. I gave talks on topics emanating from this area of interest at the Freie Universität, at the University of Oxford, and, on this topic in connection with the wider field of globalization, at the City University in London. This broader topic of globalization, most particularly the recent globalization of globalism, was the subject of a paper which constituted the topic of discussion at the first meeting of the history and anthropology group at the Wissenschaftskolleg. The same paper was discussed at Professor Lepenies' weekly seminar.

In the same connection, I participated in the preparation and conception of the research group on modernity and Islam, supported by the Wissenschaftskolleg. As part of my contribution to the conception of this project, I wrote and delivered an evening open lecture at the Wissenschaftskolleg under the title "Reconstituting Islam". Of relevance to this matter is my participation last December in Casablanca in the constitutive assembly of ALMA, the Association de Liaison entre Centres de Documentation et de Recherche sur le Monde Arabe.

All in all, this has been a dizzyingly active year: in the city, in different research and scholarly undertakings, and in organizational and public activities. It is time for a vacation. But before taking leave, I should particularly like to thank the staff of the Kolleg: the library staff for impeccable service, the secretariat for performing the mammoth task of transferring on to disc bibliographies of two decades of research, the kitchen which kept us all sweet, and the overall air of cooperativeness and courtesy.