Enacting Decolonization

Political Subjectivity in Contemporary Arab Thought

Yasmeen Daifallah

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To Samy and Samia, the wind beneath my wings . . .

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Contents

ix		NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION
1	*Introduction*	Theorize to Decolonize in Four Enactments
35	*Chapter 1*	Enacting Critique: Educating the Educator, Reforming the Reformer
97	*Chapter 2*	Enacting Historicity: Concepts in Action
141	*Chapter 3*	Enacting Renaissance: Tradition and Method in *The Critique of Arab Reason*
175	*Chapter 4*	Enacting Mastery: Cultural Critique as Subject-Formation
216	*Epilogue*	Subjects of Praxis
225		ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
229		NOTES
271		REFERENCES
299		INDEX

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Note on Transliteration

In transliterating words from Arabic, I have generally followed the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (*IJMES*) system of transliteration with the exception of proper names and a small number of Arabic terms in order to avoid a cumbersome or distracting reading experience. Specifically, I have adopted the most common spellings for proper names (e.g., Laroui instead of Al-ʿArwī, Ben Barka instead of Ibn Baraka, Zaytuna instead of Zaytūna). I have also rendered frequently occurring Arabic terms without full transliteration; these include *turath*, referring to the Arab-Islamic intellectual tradition, and the *Nahda*, denoting the period of intensive cultural production in Egypt and Greater Syria during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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INTRODUCTION

Theorize to Decolonize in Four Enactments

Reminiscing about his brisk and frenzied departure from civil war–torn Beirut to Paris in the early 1980s, Jurj Tarabishi,[1] the renowned Syrian cultural critic, recounts,

> Out of my five-thousand-book library, the only two books I took with me to Paris were Suhayl Idriss's encyclopedia *Al-Manhal* and Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri's newly published *The Formation of Arab Reason*. There I sat in my bare Paris apartment, reading Jabri's book for the second time, enticed by it all over again.[2] I went on to write this about it, word for word, in what I believe was the first published review of that book: "this book does not merely educate, it transforms. One is no longer the same person after one reads it."[3]

Tarabishi went on to become Jabri's most sustained critic—his arch-critic, one might say. Publishing more books to refute Jabri's arguments than Jabri wrote to make them, Tarabishi never tired of reiterating the effect that the first installment of Jabri's four-volume magnum opus, *The Critique of Arab Reason* (1984–2001), initially had on him. So deep was its transformative effect that Tarabishi considered this encounter to be one of the six formative moments of his life, alongside his conversion from a devout Christian to a devoted atheist and from an avid Marxist to an ardent follower and translator of Freud.[4]

This book is about how intellectual projects, such as Jabri's, transform their readers. It examines the specific theoretical, conceptual, narratological, and rhetorical strategies that the authors of these projects use and the particulars of how they use them. It argues that the transformation these projects sought to bring about was no less than the liberation of their

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readers from the fetters that continue to shackle postcolonial societies decades after their formal independence. Intellectually Left leaning and often engaged in politics beyond their writing, the authors of these projects were well-acquainted with the economic, legal, political, and ideological forces that swept through entire modes of life, organization, and production across the Arab region, displacing them and imposing new ones in their stead. Although the agents of such imposition might have changed—from the classic colonialism of Spain, Portugal, France, and Britain to the new modes of control exercised by the United States, the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and postcolonial elites—the relationship between postcolonial Arab states and peoples and these entities retained a logic of dependency that precluded genuine independence.

The intellectual projects I examine here acknowledge this political and economic dynamic but place their transformative bets on another: a field they call *culture*. Culture, for these projects and for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Arab thinkers more generally, comprises philosophical, theological, literary, and other aesthetic modes of understanding and articulating the social and political worlds, as well as the past and present traditions that inform them.[5] But placing their bets on culture work was not all that these thinkers did. Rather, as this book shows, their decades-long intellectual projects should themselves be read as birthing new dispositions toward collective life. They do so by critiquing extant dispositions, conceptualizing new ones, and envisioning how these new ones can be brought about in thought and practice. More importantly, these intellectual projects birthed new dispositions in their readers by performing that which they theorize, inhabiting that which they imagine, bringing to life in their own ways that which they envision. This vision entailed what they considered a liberated way of understanding the collective self and its multiple constituents; relating to its rich, once globally dominant intellectual and political traditions;[6] and carving out an emancipatory path in a global order in which their former colonizers remain hegemonic.

The authors studied in this book wrote at the twilight of revolutionary anticolonial projects in their native lands, when authoritarian states were becoming entrenched. Yet this is not a story of the woes, laments, or disillusionment of thinkers whose intellectual output either presaged or dwelled on the demise of these projects in the postcolonial Arab world. Such sentiments were, to be sure, hardly absent from their writings or

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from the writings of the broader generation of anticolonial intellectuals who came of age during decolonization struggles.[7] Rather, inspired by the thrust of their political-intellectual interventions, this book directs its attention elsewhere—to the aftermath of disenchantment with revolutionary projects, as it were.[8] Focusing on intellectual projects that spanned the late 1960s to the late 1990s, this book examines how anticolonial thinkers recouped and regrouped, how they took stock and shifted gears, and how they did so by mobilizing a variety of intellectual and rhetorical resources to fashion liberated political subjects in post-revolutionary times. But I am ahead of myself. Let us start at the beginning.

THE BROADER ARC: DECOLONIZATION AFTER EMPIRE

In an interview about his decades-spanning corpus, the Moroccan political theorist and historian Abdallah Laroui, one of the protagonists of this book, remarked, "Modernity is like colonialism: a *fait accompli*, a lived social reality. And, like colonialism, it is either imposed in fact and denied in utterance and belief (*mafrūḍa wa marfūḍa*), or admitted and mastered."[9] At once terse and all-encompassing—a signature Laroui style with which we shall become acquainted in due course—this remark captures the sensibility of a generation of anticolonial Arab intellectuals who bore witness to decolonization struggles, experienced their promising aftermaths and disheartening trajectories, and sought to sustain their commitments by other means. This book is about how two of these intellectuals, Mohammed Abed al-Jabri (1935–2010) and Abdallah Laroui (1933–), tried to do so between the late 1960s and the late 1990s and, more specifically, how they tried to cultivate in their readers the "admission and mastery" of modernity—the fait accompli of a protracted, invasive process of reshaping extant modes of being and knowing that they understood as here to stay.

In attempting to instill in their readers a sense of who that once-unwelcome-yet-here-to-stay "guest" was and how it can be critically and reflectively harnessed, these thinkers, I suggest, perform a decolonizing act. This act can be read in several registers. Inscribed onto the topos of the cultural politics of decolonization, it is an act of cultural self-determination, a quest to carve vibrant national cultures befitting an emergent world "that sought to create a domination-free and egalitarian world order" in the

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postwar period (Getachew 2019, 3). Inscribed onto the topos of authoritarian Arab politics, it is an act of resilience and resistance,[10] of "decolonizing the mind," to put it in the apt words of Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o.[11] Inscribed onto the topos of political theory, as this book attempts, these intellectual projects undertake broad efforts to shape their readers into decolonized political subjects by *performing* a theorization of the dispositions and habits of mind that define such subjectivity. They do this in multiple modes (philosophical, historical, polemical) and through mobilizing and braiding together diverse conceptual and rhetorical resources. This is a study of the specifics of these thinkers' deployments of these modes and resources.

To suggest that philosophical texts have the potential to transform their readers is neither original nor, I hope, controversial. This insight is at least as old as Socrates's proposition that "telling stories about justice" is not merely a "noble pastime" but, when properly done, "plants and sows in a fitting soul intelligent words which are able to help themselves and [the storyteller]" (*Phaedrus* 276e). It is likewise reflected in Plato's discussion of how stories, poetry, rhythm, and harmony are all key to cultivating "good dispositions," "gracefulness," and, ultimately, the ability to "grasp . . . and take most delight in reasonable speech" (*The Republic* 401b-e). Indeed, Socrates's and Plato's insights have themselves inspired the study of Plato's dialogues as rhetorical performances that can instill in modern audiences the capacity for ethical self-reflection (Kastely 2015) and, as Jill Frank (2018, 20) notes, can prompt the development of "our own ethical, political, and philosophical capacities, based on our own perceptual and cognitive experiences, as engaged, if always fallible, readers."

The stakes and payoffs of reading philosophical texts as transformative performances are both timely and significant, and they form the crux of this book's argument. The book's argument unfolds on two interconnected planes. The first is historical: to reconstruct and render for political theory two key figures from late twentieth-century Arab thought. On that plane, my interpretation of Laroui's and Jabri's works

- examines their intellectual projects not only for their substantive arguments but as attempts to form a decolonized Arab subject—where decolonization is understood as an extension of the liberatory aspirations of anticolonial struggles, as I explain in the next section;
- contends that these projects did not pursue this goal by providing facts, political programs, or comprehensive political visions but by

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using a variety of philosophical and rhetorical resources to fashion a particular kind of political subjectivity; and

- shows how Laroui and Jabri achieved this by making arguments in the domain of cultural critique (that is, the domain of public debates about the role of culture in postcolonial societies) and of critical reflection on why national culture failed to fulfil its liberatory potential.

Stated succinctly, this book offers a careful and systematic examination of two major interventions in Arab thought and cultural politics in the latter twentieth century qua subject-forming projects.

The second plane on which this book's argument unfolds is conceptual and political. It highlights the broader theoretical implications of each of the subarguments discussed previously by (1) emphasizing decolonization as a public political project concerned with subject formation, rather than solely a philosophical or institutional endeavor; (2) applying political theory's recent attention to rhetoric to these debates, thereby encouraging us to examine how texts stage theory, rather than simply the arguments they make; and (3) fostering more creative and critical thinking about the relationship between culture and empire. In particular, I show how these thinkers' conceptions of culture as a dynamic launchpad for decolonized subjectivity challenges salient understandings of culture, particularly as it pertains to colonial and postcolonial contexts. These include discourses that see (Muslim) culture as an identifiable, self-contained essence to which other cultures could be juxtaposed and on which they could be imposed.[12]

Together, these two registers bring the oeuvres of Laroui and Jabri to bear on a question central to late twentieth-century Arab thought and to the political theory of decolonization—namely, how can intellectual projects help cultivate decolonized political subjects in a post-revolutionary time, when anticolonial aspirations for egalitarian and democratic national and international orders have been foreclosed and political, economic, and cultural dependency—and in the Palestinian case, colonial occupation—has persisted? Both thinkers' projects are explicitly concerned with questions of cultural and epistemic liberation (*al-taḥarrur al-thaqāfi/al-maʿrifiyy*), yet they are rarely read in that register. Instead, their Arabic- and European-language commentators prefer to consider Laroui and Jabri interlocuters in (significant but ultimately parochial) debates about the meaning and role of the Arab-Islamic intellectual

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tradition (*turath*)[13] in a world made "modern" by colonialism.[14] While this book takes stock of the context of their interventions in such debates, it interprets these intellectual projects with a keen eye to their motivating thrust: the constitution of a decolonized Arab culture that is in an intimate, dialectical relationship with political experience and practice. Thus, to the question of "How have political thinkers sustained decolonization projects in post-revolutionary time?," this book draws on the philosophical corpus of Laroui and Jabri to offer four modes of cultivating the decolonized political subject, each corresponding to a set of conceptual and narrative strategies.

The first is *the critical subject*, one aware of its constitution through anticolonial Arab ideologies and of the impossibility of achieving the authentic, liberated national self that these ideologies promise. To instill this subject, Laroui deploys the conceptual tools of ideology critique and the narrative strategies of literary characterization and dramatization. Second, and to fashion a subject at once aware of their historicity and prospective agency, Laroui uses concept-historicization and the notion of paradox as a narrative and conceptual trope to enact a sense of discontinuity between the reading subject's attachment to the precolonial past, their present condition, and their future aspirations. Keenly aware of the ruse of historical continuity and authenticity, and of the tragic yet irreversible fissure between the precolonial past and postcolonial present, this *historicist subject* is well-placed to shoulder the burden of generating and executing political change.

Dissatisfied with conceiving the relationship with past cultural traditions as one of fissure, the third mode attempts to reconnect the decolonized subject with their past but on new terms. To fashion this *subject of Arab renaissance*, Jabri deploys the tools of concept resignification and the philosophical resources of structuralism to offer a reader-centric interpretive heuristic. When staged as expansively as it is for readers of his *Critique of Arab Reason*, this interpretive heuristic—together with the conceptual resources of epistemic critique and the narrative strategies of classification—all birth *the subject of mastery*. This subject is attached to their past but also able to critically and sensitively wield that past to advance present and future objectives.

These four subjectivities do not necessarily sit comfortably together because they emerge from distinct sets of concerns. Whereas the first two strategies focus on undoing current modes of attachment to the Arab-Islamic tradition (*turath*) and on clarifying modernity as a new, violently

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yet irreversibly sociopolitical and epistemological formation, the latter two are intent on harnessing the past by reinterpreting it for present use. Both reflect the anxieties of postcolonial thinkers about how to achieve a decolonialization that relies neither on a state nor an intellectual vanguard but on a yet-to-be-cultivated political subject who is fully aware of the weight of the precolonial and colonial pasts and fully equipped to take on the challenges of an oppressive and imperial political order.

To pose the question in these terms is to center decolonization as both a concept and a process. Broadly speaking, I take decolonization to mean the intellectual and political processes whose objective is the liberation from the various forms of political, economic, military, cultural, and epistemological domination of what Sylvia Wynter (1995, 5) calls "the new world order of 1492"—that is, the centuries-long, uneven, and diversely executed spread of European political and economic power across the globe, which often entailed the imposition of a capitalist system of exchange and the inscription of systems of cultural and racial hierarchy. Accounts of what decolonization means—and how it was and is to be achieved—have proliferated in contemporary academic and popular discourses. This project uses it in two registers. The first centers the understandings of decolonization (or more accurately liberation [*al-taḥarrur*]) of the protagonists of this project, themselves indebted to an established tradition of anticolonial Arab and tricontinental conceptions of what liberation means. The second, and related, register consists of my use of decolonization as a conceptual lens through which to examine how Laroui's and Jabri's intellectual projects *enact* their liberatory visions by marshalling philosophical, conceptual, and rhetorical resources to instill liberatory sensibilities in their readers.

In the remainder of this introduction, I first turn to opening up the entailments of decolonization for this project and its protagonists. I then offer a brief overview of Laroui's and Jabri's trajectories and explain why their bodies of thought enable an exploration of decolonization-through-critique in contemporary Arab thought. In the sections that follow, I introduce the interpretive lenses I use to examine Laroui's and Jabri's oeuvres as decolonizing projects and situate this book's intervention as an attempt to bring the rhetorical turn in political theory to bear on the political theory of decolonization. Finally, I provide an overview of how the book's chapters map Laroui's and Jabri's various attempts to enact in their readers a liberated subjectivity through the fourfold strategies of ideology critique, concept historicization, interpretive methods, and epistemic classification.

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Laroui, Jabri, and most Arab intellectuals in the second half of the twentieth century understood decolonization not as a return to some form of a precolonial past nor a circumvention or transcendence of the ideas and institutions introduced by colonial modernity (such as the nation-state, rationalized bureaucracy, and market or centrally planned economies).[15] They also did not mean the carving out of an epistemological and political "outside" to post-Enlightenment European concepts or political forms.[16] Rather, and notwithstanding their diverse ideological, political, or philosophical affinities, for Arab thinkers writing between the 1950s and 1990s, decolonization was a transnational vision for a strong, antiexploitive Third World. This world would be capable of addressing the challenges faced by both its own peoples and a still-imperial West from their erstwhile problems (respectively, the immiseration of many and the greed of some) through inhabiting the colonizer's forms of social, economic, and political organization before transcending them. It was a dialectical vision that embraced its antithesis to eventually overcome it. But it did not, indeed could not, understand itself as operating outside this dialectic altogether or on terms different from those dictated by colonization and the world order that emerged in its aftermath. Successful decolonization was widely understood to require three things: the physical liberation of the population, the overcoming of colonial immiseration through radical development, and a reckoning with the question of identity in the wake of empire.[17] Emerging from the colonial ambit, the "radical tricontinental politics of transformation," as Robert Young (2016, 13) aptly calls it, operated within specific constraints on action and thought, drawing on Soviet and Euro-American models as the ones available for instituting radical transformation. And yet, as recent examinations of anticolonial political visions from African thinkers (Wilder 2015; Getachew 2019) and indigenous peoples in North America (Coulthard 2014; Nichols 2019; Temin 2023) show, to operate within the bounds of empire is not to fit its molds but to inventively inhabit, rethink, and actualize them in new, unforeseen, and at times transgressive ways.

On that view, however, decolonization cannot be, as Walter Mignolo (2007, 453) describes it, a process of radical "de-linking" from colonial modernity "that leads to an epistemic shift and brings to the foreground

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other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics," and, eventually, an "other-universality or pluriversality." It can and indeed must, however, entail what Mignolo refers to as *border thinking*—a transitional stage of thought that accounts for the fact that the "Western foundation of modernity and of knowledge is on the one hand unavoidable and on the other highly limited and dangerous" (2007, 455). For thinkers, such as Laroui and Jabri, to border think is to master and be able to navigate with agility and facility the "foundation of modernity," whose effects were ubiquitous across the late twentieth-century Global South, from discourses about good governance, democracy, and human rights to the ongoing colonial occupation of Palestine. It is to also to master and navigate autochthonous traditions of thought whose persistence in the present was evidenced by the formation and proliferation of various modalities of Islamic political thought and organization in the contemporary Arab world.

Significantly, and unlike their predecessors who wrote in the hopeful aftermath of independence, Laroui and Jabri border think decolonization along modernist lines in that they do so critically and self-consciously. Their decolonizing visions stem from the realization that to cast themselves as outsiders to the dialectic of (liberal) modernity altogether—for example, by envisioning the postcolonial future as a variant of a precolonial form of collective life—would be to declare radical alterity; to mark the postcolonial subject as an absolute other, depriving it of political relevance and effectiveness in a world still operating according to the logic of modern statehood, self-determination, social justice, and human dignity; and to surrender the possibility of a genuinely universal humanism. As recent scholarship has shown, cultivating critical awareness of colonialism's formative imprint on its subjects while enabling the imagination of emancipatory politics is central to projects of liberation after empire (Wilder 2015; Getachew 2019) and to articulate a more expansive conception of the human, most notably in the works of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Sylvia Wynter (Alessandrini 2014; Sharma 2015). It is in this broader intellectual horizon that Laroui and Jabri conceived liberation as both *of* and *beyond* colonization—a sensibility that they shared with postimperial visions of freedom emerging elsewhere and that they critically and self-consciously embraced as the only practicable disposition in a world

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shaped by "the root expansion of thought" set in motion by Columbus's colonial venture (Wynter 1995, 5).

The question for us thus becomes: How can we describe these texts, thinkers, or ideas as decolonizing while they remain bound by the structures of *colonial modernity*?[18] This is a legitimate question, the answer to which constitutes the argument of this book. To briefly presage it, I posit that the decolonizing potential of these thinkers' ideas and intellectual practices lie not in how they undo or deny the connection between national independence and the (modernist) commitment to political freedom, rational social organization, industrialized economic organization, and a modernist aesthetic (in poetry, literature, and film).[19] Rather, the decolonizing potential of their theorizations is twofold. The first is these projects' acute awareness of the colonial, historically specific, *and* irreversible character of modernity. The second is their active attempts to birth a collective subject that reflects this critical awareness of the historicity of political modernity and is therefore in a (better) position to control it. I elaborate on each of these decolonizing potentials in turn.

A consequence of Laroui's and Jabri's critical consciousness of the historicity and irreversibility of colonial modernity is their understanding of its forms of life and organization as neither necessary nor natural but, rather, as the products of historical processes that must be thoroughly grasped, theorized, and inhabited to be wielded toward emancipatory (namely, egalitarian, democratic, and self-ruling) ends.[20] To inhabit this intellectual posture is to inhabit a space of constant critique:[21] The space of self-consciously engaging concepts (e.g., reason, freedom, modern statehood) and dwelling in and on sociopolitical formations (e.g., the global market, modern bureaucracy, legal rationality, new class formations) that one recognizes as colonial and imposed but from which a position of exteriority or extricability is unthinkable. Insofar as modernity sees itself as, of necessity, a "state of self-critique and absorption," and insofar as the concepts of liberation, self-determination, and emancipation that this intellectual posture draws on, adapts, and makes its own belong to what William Connolly (1988, 1) refers to as the "modern frame" of understanding self and society, these thinkers are knowingly and unapologetically modern.[22] They occupy the intellectual and epistemic space of what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2007, 4) calls "political modernity," a space defined by the institutions of the state, bureaucracy, and capitalist enterprise and by the Enlightenment concepts of the human whose genealogies run deep into European intellectual and theological traditions and that, despite

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having been wielded against the colonized, have historically provided the foundations for critiques of socially unjust practices across the globe.

What distinguishes Laroui's and Jabri's inhabitation of the space of political modernity is, first, that they do so critically—that is, with sharp awareness of the historicity of thought and of power relations in the colonial and postcolonial periods—and, second, that they insist on claiming the globality of European (colonial) modernity's legacy for all subjects rendered forcibly yet irrevocably modern. This insistence finds expression in Laroui's inventive formulation that captures the global genesis and effects of colonial modernity as an instance of "that which is available to humanity at large, *al-mutāḥ lil bashariyya jamʿā'*" (2011, 33). Clunkier in English than in Arabic, in which it has a smoother and fresher (because unfamiliar) ring, what is available to humanity at large is an expansive category whose membership criterion is the ability of a thinker or intellectual tradition to discern and express in cogent form the parameters of the human condition in a given epoch. It therefore includes seminal Islamic thinkers, such as Ibn Rushd (1126–1198) and Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), whose oeuvres Laroui (2012a, 15–19, 127) describes as expressing the limits or epitome of human thought in the medieval period, as well as major European thinkers such as Hegel and Marx, who, in his view, offered the most systematic theorization of the condition of liberal modernity. Yet, for Laroui as for Jabri, to recognize the unavoidability and globality of colonial-modernity-as-heritage is not to submit to it but, rather, to insist on the necessity of mastering it if Arabs were to once again contribute to "that which is available to humanity at large."

The second source of decolonizing potential of Laroui's and Jabri's writings, the one that this book centers, is their attempts to cultivate the sensibilities about which they speak in their readers. Laroui and Jabri do this not (or not necessarily) because they have a set vision of what it looks like to be decolonized. Rather, as this examination of their central writings hopes to show, the most profound theoretical thrust of these works lies not in their normative prescriptions but in the blend of conceptual and narrative strategies they mobilize to produce a new disposition in their postcolonial readers. In like manner, I refer to the subjectivity that Laroui's and Jabri's works attempt to instill as decolonized in a specific (and related) register—one that is critically aware of its historical constitution by precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial modes of thought and organization and, therefore, capable of reckoning with and eventually overcoming them. Seen through this lens, decolonization struggles and

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the revolutionary states that emerge in their aftermath are not capable of single-handedly ridding themselves of traces of colonial and postcolonial oppression, nor are mass political mobilizations capable of inaugurating collective and irreversible catharsis or transformation. Rendered somewhat cynical, though not disillusioned, by the failure of the postcolonial state and, more recently, by the post–Arab Spring political landscape, the decolonizing work that these texts try to do has a more modest—though, from their perspective, a more realistic and far-reaching—objective: to stage for their readers what a critical, historically sensitive, theoretically informed, and politically active approach to their intellectual past and present might look like.

THE PROTAGONISTS

Enacting Decolonization examines the intellectual projects of two preeminent Arab intellectuals and scholars: Abdallah Laroui and Mohammed Abed al-Jabri.[23] Professors at Muhammad V University in Rabat, both were (and in Laroui's case, still is) highly visible as public intellectuals in both Morocco and the Arab world more broadly. Born in the interwar period and coming of age in the 1950s, when anticolonial struggles were at their height in Morocco, the Arab world, and beyond, Laroui and Jabri had their worldviews deeply informed by aspirations for political, economic, and cultural liberation and for a greater measure of regional integration. Between the two, Laroui's writing career was longer, spanning from the late 1960s to the present, with his major theoretical corpus published between 1967 and 1996. Jabri began publishing in the 1970s, but his principal theoretical works appeared from the 1980s through the early 2000s.

Both Laroui and Jabri were representative of a generation of Arab intellectuals whose principal philosophical and political investment lay in the belief that "decolonization could produce revolutionary societies that were as egalitarian, free, and patriotic as they were anti-imperialist and humanistic" (Di-Capua 2018, 2). More often than not, this ethos expressed itself in broadly leftist terms: Laroui made extensive use of the critical resources of Marxist humanism, while Jabri, himself an avowed socialist, drew on the conceptual armature of Marxism and French structuralism. Both thinkers' allegiance to anticolonial Arab nationalism was reflected in the substance of their arguments as well as in their intentionality about

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writing in Arabic, with a primarily Arab (rather than Moroccan or North African) audience in mind. Indeed, although Laroui published a substantial body of philosophical and historiographical work in French during the 1960s and 1970s, he admits that this linguistic choice was less a matter of preference than of circumstance. It reflected his clear-eyed awareness of the intellectual hierarchies shaping Arab scholarly life at the time, particularly in Egypt and the Levant (the Mashreq), where French remained the language through which serious scholarship was most readily recognized. This awareness, expressed with pragmatism and a trace of irony, emerges most plainly in his political diaries, in which Laroui (2017b, 72) observes: "What would have been the response of my Mashreqi [readers] had I published the book [*L'idéologie arabe contemporaine*] in Arabic as I had initially intended? Neglect, no doubt! Every communication amongst us Arabs and Muslims must first go through the West . . . this, in fact, is the book's message." Testifying to the emphatic "Arab" quality of Laroui's writings, Karima Laachir (2022, 229) notes that Laroui's works created a conceptual space of "critical pan-Arabism . . . to escape the repressive Arab states' control, particularly in the 1950–1970s when postcolonial Arab states moved from revolutionary solidarity to oppressive authoritarianism."

Reflecting their authors' intellectual and public statuses, many works by Laroui and Jabri were recognized as classics soon after their publication and certainly within their lifetimes. Laroui gained repute at the age of thirty-four on the publication of his first (and still seminal) *Contemporary Arab Ideology* in 1967. Jabri rose to prominence across the Arab world with the publication of the first of four volumes of his chef d'oeuvre, *The Critique of Arab Reason*, in 1984. Both received recognition from major national, regional, and international prizes.[24] Their writings were in continuous publication for decades by the most-prestigious regional presses; their ideas were the subject of book-length responses by leading Arab intellectuals of their generation; and their bodies of work were the topic of an impressive and ever-growing number of Arabic-language dissertations, books, and conferences.

Far from being ivory-tower academics, both men were deeply invested in local, regional, and global politics. Serving as a Moroccan cultural attaché in Egypt and Paris at the beginning of his career, Laroui later carried out diplomatic missions to France on behalf of the Moroccan monarchy.[25] Throughout his career, Laroui also wrote political diaries in which he recorded his immediate reactions to developments in Moroccan, Arab,

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and international politics between the early 1970s and the early 2000s. Ironically, for someone renowned for his avoidance of media attention, Laroui has recently emerged as an intellectual and cultural icon for a new generation of Moroccan and Arab youth.[26] Jabri, one of the most politically involved Arab intellectuals of his generation, was a founding member and longtime leader in the major Moroccan socialist party, the Socialist Union of Popular Forces. He was also a former editor of and regular contributor to the party's daily, *al-Muḥarrir* (*The Liberator*), even long after he resigned from the party's political bureau in 1981. Highly visible in regional conferences and Arabic-language media, Jabri had a deep influence on generations of Arab intellectuals. As the Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi observes in this regard, "to judge from the heated debates in which students are everywhere continuously engaging, al-Jabri was probably the philosopher who was most read by young people in the Arab world" (as quoted in Hegasy 2010). Jabri also had name recognition beyond his readership, as reflected in the fact that Al Jazeera, the most widely watched media platform in the Arab world, produced two documentary films about him: the first biographical and the second featuring a probing set of interviews with contemporary Arab intellectuals about Jabri's reconstruction of the Arab-Islamic tradition.[27]

The stature of both thinkers in Arab intellectual circles is due, in part, to the genre-crossing, disciplinarily diverse natures of their respective bodies of thought. In Laroui's case, this includes a rich body of works on philosophy and cultural criticism (the subject matter of this study), as well as his status as a first-rate historian whose historical writings, especially the *History of the Maghreb*, "sent shock waves through the international community of Maghrebin experts" on its publication. In the words of the historian of North Africa Stuart Schaar (1979, 94), it was "the most important volume written in a European language on the Maghrib" in the two decades prior to its publication in 1970. In addition to his scholarly oeuvre and political diaries, Laroui also penned a set of novels (featuring a literary quartet published between the mid 1960s and the late 1980s and three additional works where Laroui experiments with different genres) and, most recently, French-to-Arabic translations of works by Rousseau and Montesquieu. Jabri's oeuvre is similarly wide-ranging. It includes early pedagogical writings on the history of science; a reconstruction of major figures and trends in the Islamic tradition, culminating in the four volume *Critique*; substantive prefaces to new editions of Ibn Rushd's (Averroes) philosophical works that he commissioned and supervised; and his

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multivolume reflections on the Quran, published soon before his passing in 2010. Jabri was also an active journalist and pamphleteer, regularly contributing to current debates on topics including religion, politics, democracy, and human rights in local and regional media outlets.

The sheer breadth and influence of their intellectual contributions make Laroui's and Jabri's writings deserving of a close, systematic reading in a political theoretical register, which they are yet to receive. Yet their renown and accolades are not the main reason that they are the protagonists of this book. Rather, I focus on these two figures because of their sustained attention to and deep engagement with the issue of decolonization after empire. They engaged with this theme in several significant ways that this book examines. First, Laroui and Jabri provide one of the few sustained Arabic-language explorations of the problem of cultural decolonization, or the decolonization of being and knowing in the wake of colonial independence, and the failure of postcolonial projects to effect radical transformation. Second, each of their intellectual projects offers complex and philosophically versatile models of how to wield concepts and analytic frames drawn from diverse intellectual traditions, and how to deploy a broad variety of interpretive styles, narrative tropes, and rhetorical techniques to do liberatory things with words. The precise marks of that distinction, and the mechanics of how these conceptual and rhetorical strategies work together to instill a decolonized sensibility in their readers, are the subject matter of this book.

To underscore the similarities between Laroui's and Jabri's trajectories and cultural politics is not to say that there are not substantive differences between their philosophical, intellectual, and political positions nor to deny that their respective projects are representative of distinct trends in contemporary Arab intellectual discourse on various topics. Notably and famously, whereas Laroui proclaims that colonialism irrevocably severed all connections with past modes of knowing and being, and that the Islamic tradition can therefore be neither revived nor redeemed for a context to which it no longer belongs, Jabri aims to reclaim that tradition through introducing a new modality of interpreting it. These approaches are, in their turns, premised on different political imaginaries: While Laroui conceives of the future as shaped by the forces of global imperialism (including capitalism, liberal democracy, and Euro-Atlantic political and military hegemony) and that its epistemological, political, and economic tools should therefore be mastered on their own terms and challenged on their own turf, Jabri sees progress as a process that needs to

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be rooted in local traditions of knowledge, particularly the offerings of the Arab-Islamic intellectual tradition. That said, by local traditions, Jabri does not imply extant modes of learning and inhabiting that tradition but a critical reinterpretation of its corpus, which he attempts to deliver. In his view, the very process of interpretation is meant to enact an orientation to that tradition that asserts control and command rather than submission and apprenticeship.

These differences, however, are not the axes around which this study turns. Rather, this book is about examining the instructive and consequential subject-making effects of Laroui's and Jabri's modalities of philosophical and cultural critique. Indeed, close attention to both thinkers' political-intellectual objectives and philosophical starting points reveal more similarity than difference. Significantly, both Laroui and Jabri identify an *epistemological rupture* (*qaṭīʿa ibistimūlūjiyya*) between Islamic and modern social and political thought; the difference between their respective positions lies in the distinct ecologies that they cultivate in response to this rupture.

Jabri confronts this rupture by re-engaging the Arab-Islamic tradition, deploying structuralism as a conceptual framework to deconstruct, reconstruct, and reorient the Arab subject toward it. As I elaborate in chapter 3, this is, above all, a political undertaking. Composed between the mid-1980s and early 2000s, Jabri's oeuvre was carefully attuned to the political subject of the Islamic Revival. It was formed in a milieu in which public discourse stressed the primacy of Islamic piety and conduct and posited adherence to Islamic normative legal and ethical frameworks (Shariah) as the legitimate foundation of social and political life. Within this ecology, Jabri's reconstruction of *turath* through an exogenous tool kit sought to advance a modernist project of decolonization—rationalist, social democratic, and regionally integrated—by pathways distinct from the revolutionary nationalism of the 1950s and 1960s.

Laroui cultivates a different ecology of critique. Beyond strategic, surgical, theme-driven reinterpretations of specific figures and intellectual trends in the Arab-Islamic tradition, he directs his attention to the assumptions that undergird modern Arab thought about reform using the tools of Marxist ideology critique. Combining Marxism and the narrative devices of literary characterization, Laroui interrogates how "Arab" and "Western" identities are imagined, showing how these categories distort rather than illuminate the Arab socioeconomic condition. His historically

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sensitive approach neither dismisses nor condemns reformers but seeks to clear conceptual ground for a more adequate grasp of social and political reality. Having critiqued the dominant assumptions underpinning the major currents of anticolonial Arab thought, Laroui, in the second stage of his writing career, turns his attention to presenting the governing concepts and epistemologies of the postcolonial order—an order in which former colonizers continue to exercise political, economic, and intellectual dominance.

Placed side by side, Jabri and Laroui emerge not as antagonists but as companions within a broader ecology of decolonization. Both root their projects in a recognition of rupture with the precolonial order of things and both impress on their readers the dangers of failing to reckon with its implications. Yet they diverge in how they distribute their energies—Jabri toward a wide-ranging reconstruction of *turath*, Laroui toward staging the epistemic conditions of the postcolonial present. Their ecologies thus differ in philosophical and narratological form but converge in purpose.

It is from this shared yet differentiated terrain that this book takes its point of departure. My aim is not to adjudicate between these thinkers or fit them into standard postcolonial debates—whether they belong to the school focused on the critique of Eurocentrism or the one dedicated to proposing decolonial visions for the future. Nor do I propose to fold them into a decolonial canon alongside W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, or Mahatma Gandhi. Rather, I approach their interventions as instances of a distinctive mode of political theorization, one oriented toward the resubjectivation of colonized peoples through the interplay of theory and praxis, rather than through the production of abstract concepts or normative visions. It is to the analytical lenses through which I interpret these projects that I now turn.

INTERPRETIVE LENSES

The central questions I am bringing to bear on Laroui's and Jabri's bodies of thought are: How do anticolonial thinkers persist in their attempts to fashion decolonized subjects in post-revolutionary time? What conceptual strategies do they use? What resources do they draw on and how? The main argument of this book is that a central way through which anticolonial intellectual projects (such as those of Laroui and Jabri) instill

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liberatory sensibilities in their readers is by *performing* for them what a decolonized mode of thinking and knowing might look like. Accordingly, I posit that the political theoretical crux of these projects lies both in their substantive propositions about what a liberatory orientation toward precolonial pasts and the postcolonial present should be and, perhaps more significantly, the mechanics through which these propositions are delivered to their prospective audiences. For such thinkers as Laroui and Jabri, as with most of their progressive predecessors and contemporaries, a liberatory approach to Arab collective life entails an orientation that is epistemically critical and rationalist; politically rational, social-democratic, and anti-imperialist;[28] and economically egalitarian and independent.

This argument turns on a set of key concepts: the subject and self, performance, culture, and the Arab-Islamic tradition, or *turath*. It also draws on certain understandings of the temporality of postcolonial thought and politics, which I discuss in chapters one and two, respectively, under the terms critical-reflexive time and post-revolutionary time. In what follows, I offer a brief account of how I use these terms. I employ them less as concepts with fixed content, whether definitive or contested, and more as heuristics or interpretive lenses. They find their genesis in my extended engagement with the works of Laroui and Jabri rather than in a framework I borrow from other theorists and impose onto their writings.

Self, Consciousness, Subject

The concepts of subject and subjectivity are not widely used in contemporary Arab intellectual discourse and certainly not by Laroui or Jabri. Indeed, the term *subject* has no distinct Arabic language equivalent. When translated, the most common term provided is *al-dhāt*, whose literal translation is *the self*. That said, Laroui's and Jabri's specific usage of the word *self* cannot be assumed to connote reference to *the subject*. This is because both Laroui and Jabri use *self* and the closely related term *consciousness* (*waʿi*)—typically paired with *Arab* (*al-dhāt al-ʿarabiyya*, *al-waʿi al-ʿarabiyy*)—as terms whose meaning they treat as intuitively evident to their audience rather than as philosophical concepts requiring definition and justification.

Broadly speaking, Laroui and Jabri use *Arab self* and *Arab consciousness* in two ways. The first recalls both revolutionary Arab nationalism's aspiration for regional unity (in addition to freedom and socialism) and the shared sense of disappointment at the failure of postcolonial states

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to deliver on this aspiration, most particularly regarding the question of Palestine.[29] More-recent examples of the resonance of this register of Arabness can be seen in such formulations as the *Arab Uprisings*, the *Arab Spring*, and the *Arab Street*, in which the referent *Arab* denotes not only a geolinguistic region but also a perceived common trajectory and future horizon. This nondifferentiated, nonhistorical usage of Arab selfhood and consciousness notwithstanding, Jabri and Laroui both signal their awareness that what they use as an intuitive trope is in fact a product of a relatively recent historical formation (anticolonial Arab nationalism) rather than a timeless, stable essence. In other words, their usage is "strategically essentialist" in that they are aware of the historicity of its terms (*Arab self*, *consciousness*) but also of their political and rhetorical utility in recalling and calling forth that which they name—a collective political agent with shared concerns and aims.

The second sense in which *consciousness* is used in their writing is analytical. Broadly speaking, Jabri and Laroui use this term to refer to how the subject's consciousness is connected to their socioeconomic reality and, relatedly, to the ideologies of the age. In this sense, consciousness is a product of historically specific sociohistorical formations of which Arab culture is a manifestation. Avowed (though critical) heirs to a lineage of Arab thinkers who assigned culture a central role in anticolonial politics and keen readers of humanist trends in Western Marxism, both Laroui and Jabri assign to culture a consciousness-transforming role. This usage is less explicit than the first one but is palpable throughout their respective analyses of and prescriptions for Arab culture, as I discuss in the section "Culture and *Turath*."

Drawing on these usages, I use the terms *subject* and *subjectivity* for two interpretive purposes throughout the book. The first is as a prism through which to reconstruct how Laroui's and Jabri's cultural critiques articulate both a diagnosis of their Arab readership's orientations toward their social and political worlds and a vision for their transformation. This usage provides the heuristic needed to unearth and foreground their underdeveloped and often implicit references to the *Arab self* and *consciousness*. Put simply, my first goal in using *subject* and *subjectivity* is to enable a reconstructive-analytical rendering of how these thinkers conceive of the political subject as both a product of its historical context as well as an agent of historical change.

The second purpose for which I use *subject* is to track, examine, and analyze the specific operations through which these two intellectual

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projects transform their readers. This lens enables careful attention to the workings of conceptual and rhetorical formulations, literary devices, and classificatory schema to make arguments and to enact a specific set of sensibilities—namely, to birth the critical, historically conscious, and active reader who, for both Laroui and Jabri, is the agent of decolonization par excellence. Here, too, I build on these thinkers' conception of culture's transformative capacities, including its ability to educate and reorient. In sum, then, I use subject and subjectivity to interpret these projects for what they are: political interventions launched in an intellectual field and meant to reconstitute their reading publics.

In so doing, I pair two distinct modes of understanding subjectivity. One is associated with modern (socialist, nationalist) understandings of the collective subject as historical agent; the other is a poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity as a product of discourse and power. I use *subject* to capture both: these thinkers' understandings of their subjects as historically constituted and (potentially) agentic as well as the ways in which their philosophical works operate as discourses directed at fashioning a certain kind of readership or political subject.

These two notions of the subject entail distinct, even contradictory, political implications. Poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity problematize the very idea of collective agency—whether vested in an intellectual vanguard, a class, or a nation—thus destabilizing two foundational pillars of anticolonial visions of revolutionary change: collective action and historical progress. Yet, when anchored in Laroui's and Jabri's intellectual projects, these two senses of *the subject* prove more resonant than dissonant. That resonance, I suggest, is a function of these thinkers' awareness of how a public is constituted through the interaction of multiple national and global forces and their understanding of their projects as intellectual and political interventions in these fields of force. The notion of the subject offers a conceptual space for the critique of that constitution and provides an analytical lens through which to articulate the political stakes of their projects and analyze the strategies, or micro-workings, that these thinkers mobilize to make these projects work—that is, to enact new modes of political thinking and acting.

To be sure, this use of "subjectivity" recalls poststructuralist formulations, especially from Foucault and Alan Badiou—the former construing it as an effect of epistemes (Foucault 1994), discursive formations (Foucault 1972), and the play of power (Foucault 1977) and the latter as the product of political events (Badiou 2006). These resonances inform my

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mode of using this concept. Ultimately, however, my use is inspired by and tailored for the way that Laroui and Jabri conceive of their theoretical interventions as political events with the capacity to fashion new modes of being, knowing, and acting. My use of performance as heuristic is meant to weave together and conceptualize these two registers of using *the subject*. It does so by illustrating how these thinkers attempt "to do things with words."

Performance

I use the notion of *performance* to refer to the specific ways that Laroui and Jabri formulate and deliver their arguments. As an interpretive lens, it provides a way to zoom in on how their arguments enact their substance or on the political "content of the form" of their cultural critiques, to use Hayden White's apposite formulation.[30] It is, in short, an analytic frame that enables a focus on the *how* rather than solely on the *what* of their political theories. More generally, my usage of performance as a prism for textual interpretation in this study tries to capture the specific kind of intervention a generation of Arab political thinkers sought to make amid the disappointments of the 1970s through the early 2000s in their efforts to liberate Arab culture from what they perceived as its fetters—an uncritical attachment to European ideals and to certain modes of interpreting the Arab-Islamic tradition. This cultural liberation was seen by Laroui and Jabri as a prerequisite for (and in a dialectical relationship with) liberatory praxis, especially struggles for democracy, social equality, and a form of regional integration that could give Arab countries greater leverage in global affairs.

I adapt the concept of performance from John L. Austin's distinction between *constative* and *performative* utterances in his tellingly titled *How to Do Things with Words*. Although the former's function is to "describe," "report," or "constate." The function of the performative utterance "is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing, or to state that I am doing it: it is to *do* it" (1962, 6; emphasis is original). Examples of *performatives* (a now oft-used noun Austin coined to abbreviate *performative utterance*) that Austin provides and that have since become well-known are of the declarative type (e.g., "I name this ship Queen Elizabeth") and the contractual type (e.g., "I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow") (1962, 5). Austin further refines this distinction into one between the three dimensions of single utterances: the locutionary, denoting

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the utterance; the illocutionary, denoting the performative dimension of the utterance; and the perlocutionary, indicating its effect on, or consequence for, its audience (1962, 101).

Enacting Decolonization analyzes the *illocutionary force* of Laroui's and Jabri's interventions by paying special attention to their writings as illocutionary acts—in Austin's words, as the "*performance of an act in saying something* as opposed to the performance of an act of saying something" (1962, 99; emphasis added). To claim I use this scheme as Austin defines it (i.e., that I consider all the utterances of Laroui and Jabri to be of the illocutionary, performative kind) would be to grossly overstate my usage of these terms. Rather, I draw on Austin's distinction loosely and suggestively to bring into focus the angle from which I examine these thinkers' works. As Austin rightly remarks, much of our interpretive activity with regard to utterances (oral or written) hinges on the context in which they are made. Besides the historical and political contexts, these include the "web of beliefs" (Bevir 1999, 5) of which utterances are part, and the broader webs of meanings and traditions of discourse (Asad 2009, 10) in which they intervene. In the following chapters, I elucidate the performative function of Laroui's and Jabri's writings by attending to their historical, intellectual, political, and linguistic-rhetorical contexts. This is reminiscent of a history of ideas approach that seeks to better understand concepts by situating them in their contexts of intervention, yet my focus is not on establishing the historical or interpretive truth of specific concepts. Rather, the objective is to track the ways in which concepts are defined, laced together, and staged to instill liberatory dispositions in a specific readership.

To be sure, the utterances I examine have sometimes been treated as descriptive or constative statements—that is, as propositions (about the Islamic tradition, Arab-Islamic history, or modern Arab thought) whose accuracy is the topic of investigation. This is an appropriate and productive endeavor whose consequences could serve, and have sometimes served, to refute or complicate some of the historical and philosophical claims that Jabri and Laroui have made. I refer to such revisions, refutations, and complications in the following chapters, but this interpretive modality does not reflect the orientation of this study, which is concerned with the conceptual and rhetorical strategies of how Laroui's and Jabri's writings aim to enact their objectives. Likewise, I focus on the performative and illocutionary dimensions of Jabri's and Laroui's texts and utterances, not their perlocutionary ones. That is to say, this book analyzes how these texts' theoretical and historiographical formulations attempt to actualize

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their respective decolonizing visions but does not test whether they have indeed been persuasive or convincing for particular readers or audiences.

Culture and Turath

Like many twentieth-century Arab intellectuals, both Laroui and Jabri use but do not define the term *culture* (*thaqāfa*), likely because they considered its meaning self-evident.[31] In general, and unless qualified by the adjective *popular* (*shaʿbiyya*), Arab writing in the mid- to late twentieth century does not use *culture* in the anthropological sense to denote an economy of symbols, ritual practices, and oral histories among a certain group of people. Rather, it uses *culture* to refer to the field of Arabic-language intellectual production, past and present. It is in that sense that Laroui's early writings sharply delineate the realm of *culture* from *folklore*. He describes the former as a field of creative endeavor and a potential site for expressing historically specific experiences of the universal condition of coloniality and modernity and folklore as a colonial cultural formation par excellence, voyeuristic and ahistorical (Laroui 2011, 208–12). In addition, and despite Laroui's and Jabri's identification with leftist worldviews and politics (such as socialism, Marxism, revolutionary nationalism, and Third Worldism), their usage of *culture* is not primarily meant as a designation of the ideational (e.g., philosophical, aesthetic, literary, legal, religious) as an epiphenomenal expression of underlying socioeconomic relations.

Broadly speaking, Laroui and Jabri employ the concept of *culture* in four interrelated senses: descriptive, critical, political, and theoretical. The descriptive sense refers to the historical corpus of that culture—namely, the Arab-Islamic intellectual tradition (*al-turāth al-ʿarabī al-islāmī*, hereafter *turath*)—and to the attempts by Arab intellectuals and reformers to reclaim it in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This corpus encompasses the linguistic, literary, religious, scientific, and philosophical works produced in regions governed by successive Islamic polities since the eighth century AD. The terrain of *turath* includes linguistic disciplines, such as rhetoric, grammar, and lexicography; the Islamic sciences of Quranic exegesis, the compilation and validation of prophetic reports, law and legal theory, theology, and mysticism; and the translation, reception, and adaptation of Greek philosophy in the domains of metaphysics, ethics, logic, and politics.

Following Orientalist scholarship, contemporary Arab thinkers' periodization of *turath* typically distinguishes between two periods. The first,

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the classical period, features the formation, consolidation, and flourishing of the various disciplines of Islamic knowledge and dates to the eighth through the twelfth centuries (Hodgson 1974; Makdisi 1981; Hanafi 1992; Al-Jabri 2019). This is then followed by a postclassical period that commences around the thirteenth century and extends until the nineteenth century. This period is often understood as a period of cultural stagnation and political decline (*ʿasr al-inḥiṭāṭ*), in which the production of original Islamic knowledge gave way to the proliferation of commentaries on classical works.[32] It should be noted that recent scholarship reinterprets the postclassical period as a time of productive plurality, creative systematization, and, by the eighteenth century, critical self-reflection and reform (Hallaq 1984; El-Rouayheb 2015; Dallal 2018), although this revisionist position was not (and is arguably still not) predominant among contemporary Arab intellectuals.

To be sure, Laroui and Jabri differ in their characterizations and mobilizations of *turath*. Laroui sees it as an always already reconstructed cultural history, mediated by present concerns, and therefore unavailable for neutral study. This understanding of *turath* is reflected in Laroui's concern with examining modern Arab thought's usage of *turath* and his own recurrence to some of its figures to examine a specific set of contemporary problems (for example, the problems of reason and freedom, as we shall see in chapter 2). In contrast, Jabri understands *turath* as a crucial resource for contemporary Arab society and politics, the critical and scientific study of which could yield transformations in their condition. What both agree on, however, is that the state of generalized Muslim intellectual efflorescence subsided around the thirteenth century, notwithstanding the emergence of specific works of intellectual distinction in its aftermath.

The next stage in the commonplace periodization of Arab thought and culture is that of the Arab *Nahda* (*al-nahḍa al-ʿarabiyya*). Beginning in the early nineteenth century and extending through the early twentieth century, this period featured a complex set of material and intellectual developments associated with colonial Europe's incursions into the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Culturally, these developments included the introduction of print on a broad scale, heightened levels of publication and circulation of periodicals and newspapers, the translation of European works of literature and philosophy, and the publication of new editions of classical Arabic-language texts. Each of these contributed to the flourishing of vigorous, sometimes heated, debates among poets,

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belle-lettrists, polemicists, and politicians of the day (Hourani 1983; El Shamsy 2020; Ahmed 2021). The first, descriptive sense of culture encompasses the products of classical and postclassical Arabic-language knowledge produced under Islamic rule, as well as the reproduction, reclamation, and reconstruction of these intellectual works that occurred during the *Nahda*.

Second, Laroui and Jabri employ *culture* in a critical-theoretical register. Both thinkers were keenly attuned to the Marxist understanding of culture as a mechanism for reproducing class domination and, when projected globally, imperial domination. They were also alert to the role of European Orientalism within the broader imperialist cultural matrix. In addition, they share with postcolonial theory a critical attentiveness to colonial difference as the site of emergence of modern Arab culture—a recognition that Edward Said (1994, 210) describes in *Culture and Imperialism* as "the partial tragedy of resistance, that it must to a certain degree work to recover forms already established or at least influenced or infiltrated by the culture of empire." This sensibility is evident in Laroui's delineation of Arab ideology as a colonial effect (discussed in chapter 1) and in Jabri's framing of *turath* as an ideological formation within anticolonial Arab thought (discussed in chapter 3).

The third, political, register in which Laroui and Jabri use *culture* layers its ideological and epistemological functions onto the bodies of knowledge of *turath* and the intellectual products of the *Nahda*. When used in this register, *culture* denotes the repertoire of subject-forming resources whose (re)production demands critical engagement from Arab intellectuals and scholars. Specifically, it emphasizes the capacity of culture—understood as the domain of classical and contemporary knowledge production and creative endeavor—to shape and transform its audiences. This usage is analogous to the neo-Marxist conception of culture as a domain that is influenced by, and analytically distinct from, class relations and that is therefore capable of affecting those relations (Williams 1971).

Finally, and relatedly, I identify a further register in which Laroui and Jabri deploy the concept of culture—namely, culture as theory. In this fourth usage, the crucial distinction is between culture-as-ideology and culture-as-theory. Whereas the former reproduces modes of being and knowing that sustain political and cultural domination, the latter probes, punctures, and critiques hegemonic ideological discourses (statist, Islamist, or imperialist) and ultimately reorients and transforms its readers.

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Neither Laroui nor Jabri explicitly acknowledge, let alone systematically theorize, this distinction. Yet holding it in view, I suggest, is essential for grasping the full significance of their understanding of culture as a site of subject formation.

Drawing on these multiple understandings of culture, this book builds on and complicates understandings of anticolonial culture as, in large part, a colonial effect (Chatterjee 1993; Bhabha 1994; Mamdani 1996) and of contemporary critiques of culture as a product of liberal discourses (on civilization, tolerance, freedom) that, as Wendy Brown incisively suggests, "constructs and positions liberal and nonliberal subjects, cultures and regimes" (Brown 2006, 4); that serve "not only to anoint Western superiority but also to legitimate Western cultural and political imperialism" (Brown 2006, 7); and of which "the Muslim question" (Norton 2013) is a prime example. Without denying any of these significant cadences of *culture* as a site of the production and reproduction of colonial domination, this book shifts the lens from the imperial core to the anti-imperial periphery and from the colonial and postindependence periods to the twilight of revolutionary projects to examine the liberating potential of cultural critique in late twentieth-century Arab thought.

DECOLONIZING POLITICAL THEORY AT THE RHETORICAL TURN

This book situates itself at the interstices of two trends in political theory: (1) the political theory of decolonization and the comparative and global turns in political theory and (2) the role of rhetoric in and as political theory.[33] These two realms have hitherto existed as two distinct modes of doing political theory: the one examining how anticolonial thinkers have fashioned political visions for a postimperial world, the other paying close attention to connecting "what theorists say to *how* they say it . . . what a text *says* to what it *does*, to what it *makes happens in its reader*" (Shulman 2022, 470; emphasis in original). One of the objectives of this book is to bring these two streams of political theorizing together by using rhetorical analysis as a tool to systematically examine the political theory of decolonization.

In doing so, *Enacting Decolonization* responds to invitations from both these bodies of work. For example, in their book *Political Theories of Decolonization*, Margaret Kohn and Keally McBride (2011, 4) have called

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on political theorists of colonialism to shift their focus away from canonical thinkers in imperial metropoles to "the lively and illuminating debate about the problems of colonialism, decolonization, and postcoloniality by those very people who have experienced it." This includes taking seriously (and on their own terms) the way decolonization projects craft themselves and making space for a political theory of decolonization that does not require identifying a "self-contained tradition of thought that stands outside the idioms and terms of Western political thinking . . . but emerges from a creative and combative relationship to those terms as it responded to distinctive and evolving political dilemmas" (Getachew 2019, 77). Aligned with that approach, this book brings the fine-grained attention that has largely been the domain of examinations of the "Western canon of political thought" (and was recently extended to Black political thought) to bear on an archive that has hitherto escaped close scholarly scrutiny—namely, with how contemporary Arab thinkers concerned with the twin problematic of persistent cultural colonization and despotic postcolonial politics mobilize a complex of theoretical and rhetorical strategies to cultivate a decolonized sensibility in their readership. Moreover, by looking at Arab intellectual production in the 1970s–1990s from the perspective of decolonial political theory, this book also heeds the recent cautionary that the "turn toward colonialism and anticolonial thought in the Anglo-American discipline of political theory . . . has been marked by a tendency to typecast a handful of figures (e.g., Du Bois, Fanon, Gandhi) . . . [as] synecdochical for anticolonial thought" (Idris 2022, 337). The following exegesis of Laroui's and Jabri's works is both generative of, and brings them to bear on, a new set of questions—namely, those relating to the subject-forming role of political theory in the postcolony and beyond.

This brings us to the second stream of scholarship in which this project intervenes: that of rhetorical political theory. Growing out of a renewed focus on the role of rhetoric in political thought,[34] this trend urges political theorists to pay close attention to how narratological art is intimately connected to the critical upshot of theoretical texts.[35] They invite us to examine how the structure, tenor, rhetorical style, and conceptual appropriations in a text constitute an inseparable part of its content. As Torrey Shanks pointedly puts it in the context of her examination of John Locke's corpus, "we do not understand the critical projects of the *Essay* or the *Two Treatises* without attention to the practices of style and invention through which they are brought to life for a judging readership" (2015, xii). Motivated by democratic theory's recent focus on rhetoric as

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a crucial constituent of deliberation and communicative action (Garsten 2006; 2011), the rhetorical turn has recently expanded to examinations of canonical works of political theory (Shulman 2008; Shanks 2015; Jill Frank 2018), critical-theoretical examinations of normative political ideals such as *the people* (Jason Frank 2010a) and *peace* (Idris 2018), and analyses of how nontextual rhetorical practices, such as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) execution videos, "seek to constitute their audiences through the very visual and visceral power of their address" (Euben 2017, 1008). In addition, scholars of African American political thought have begun exploring the politically generative potential of such genres as poetry, literature, polemic, and autobiography as "practices of tending, of cultivating the habits through which individuals constate a collective existence as equals," as Lawrie Balfour (2021, 544) observes in her study of Toni Morrison's writings or, as Nolan Bennett (2019, 3) highlights, as ways in which political actors offer autobiographies not as "stories in memoriam but to move people to action."

Working with the same sensibility but within a different archive, Stephen Sheehi remarks that the value of one of the founding texts of Arab identity, George Antonius's 1938 *The Arab Awakening*, "should be found not in its trustworthiness as a secondary source, but in its eloquence and clarity *as a primary source*" (Sheehi 2004, 9; emphasis added). Although Antonius's text has been described as "biased" (as Jabri and Laroui have been described on numerous occasions), "its ideological tenor is the source of its rhetorical power" (Sheehi 2004, 9). An interpretation attuned to the rhetorical dimension of a text such as Antonius's would therefore shift focus away from its empirical flaws or ideological charge and focus instead on how it operates as a "manifesto of selfhood, that is to say, as a metaphysical and epistemological phenomenon" (Sheehi 2004, 8–9). Arguing in a similar vein, Tarek El-Ariss urges scholars of Arab literary and intellectual history to conceive the *Nahda*, the nineteenth- to early twentieth-century Arab literary and cultural movement, as less a period of colonially induced "awakening" to Enlightenment ideals of knowledge and freedom and more as a process and a performance. In his words, El-Ariss encourages a reconception of the *Nahda* "not so much as a historical period with clear or unclear epistemic breaks [with what came before it] but rather as a process, a trial, as a condition of possibility and a state of mind that cuts through historical periods" (2015, 265), and "an attitude, a position, a posture that has more to do with the *forging* of the nahdah scholar and writer rather than a reflection of a clearly delimited

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time period" (2015, 263; emphasis added). In short, El-Ariss suggests understanding the *Nahda* as a set of habits of mind and affect rather than as an intellectual movement focused on recovering a body of knowledge (as in the republication of Arab classics) or on transferring and adapting another (as in the translation of European texts). Building on the insights of Sheehi and El-Ariss, this book extends their scope beyond the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and beyond ideological texts (such as *The Arab Awakening*) to encompass contemporary philosophy and cultural critique—that is, second-order, theoretically informed reflections on the ideological foundations of modern Arab political thought.

In sum, *Enacting Decolonization* brings the interpretive attentiveness that political theorists who focus on rhetoric have recently used to examine canonical works in Western political theory to cast a fresh analytical lens on the ways in which postcolonial thinkers envision and enact freedom after empire.[36] In doing so, the book broadens the rhetorical turn that has hitherto mostly been confined to Euro-Atlantic texts and contexts. In like manner, *Enacting Decolonization* broadens and deepens the decolonial turn in political theory. It broadens it by introducing to its relatively limited cast of characters (most notably, Fanon, Du Bois, and Gandhi) an additional set of characters who center a different set of problems and, consequently, who propose different kinds of visions. It is not only the expansion in number, geographical range, or intellectual tradition that I am concerned with here, however. Rather, it is the expansion of the kinds of problem spaces that comprise the repertoire of the political theory of decolonization. Hitherto, most writings in this field have been concerned with the early to mid-twentieth century—the heyday of colonialism and decolonizing struggles. By focusing on the final quarter of the century, the temporal-political formation of post-revolutionary time, I am engaging with thinkers who faced and posited a new problematic: that of fashioning a historical agent after the eclipse of the state, the people, the peasantry, the proletariat, and the intellectual vanguard, and that of cultivating a relationship of critical fidelity to the precolonial past. The central argument of *Enacting Decolonization* is that these thinkers' oeuvres themselves constitute attempts to fashion such a subject and to cultivate such a relationship.

In addition to broadening the scope and, therefore, the kinds of questions and intellectual configurations of the political theory of decolonization, this project also deepens it. Recent works have provided much-needed accounts of the constructive political visions of political thinkers from Anglophone and Francophone Africa to the Caribbean

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(Wilder 2015; Getachew 2019) and from India to Indigenous North America (Temin 2023; Sultan 2024). These contributions range in scale from the local to the global and explore alternate modes, principles, and scales of governance. This book shares the analytic focus of this recent scholarship on developing a political theory of decolonization by reference to its originators, but it shifts its unit of analysis from world-making to subject-making—that is, from attempts to envision collective life otherwise to attempts to fashion political subjects who are able to imagine and enact these alternate visions. It does so by carrying out a granular, extended, and systematic reading of how two postcolonial intellectuals conceived of and sought to instill emancipatory dispositions in their readers.[37]

To be sure, comparative and global political theory has paid attention to the subject-forming effects of conceptual and rhetorical operations in colonial and postcolonial settings. We encounter this in Roxanne Euben's (2006) and in David Scott's (2004) attentiveness to how narrative forms and modes of emplotment reflect and constitute modes of inhabiting and representing the political world for both colonizer and colonized. We also encounter this in Euben's recent works on how the language of humiliation operates in various registers to express and constitute subjects of impotence and retaliation (Euben 2017; 2022; 2025). Additionally, we see it in studies of how conceptual innovation, resignification, and realignment are intimately connected with the labor of envisioning political transformation in modern Chinese (Jenco 2015) and Islamic (Idris 2016; Iqtidar 2016, 2021) anticolonial thought. Similarly, Murad Idris (2018) attends to how the political and theoretical effects of figurations of war and peace in European and Islamic political thought operate in "polemical, provincial, and parasitic" ways to configure peace as a normative ideal and how, through paying critical attention to the subject- and world-forming effects of these configurations, we can cultivate the ethos of suspicion required for probing this normativity. What this book does is expand on and deepen these insights into the significance of conceptual and narrative styles by making it the primary focus of its analysis and by bringing it to a new and little-studied archive.

Just as it introduces post-revolutionary Arab thought to the field of political theory, *Enacting Decolonization* brings a political-theoretical approach to Arab intellectual history, a field reinvigorated over the past two decades, particularly after the 2011 Arab Uprisings (Hanssen and Weiss 2016; 2018). Like political theory, the field of intellectual history has

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recently subjected itself to soul-searching questions about its "geohistorical and geopolitical location," for "despite the growth in global intellectual history . . . Western European intellectual traditions remain central in the formation of its canon. Within these intellectual formations, the non-West often makes its appearance only as an afterthought—producing exemplars but rarely epistemologies" (El Shakry 2021, 1). Together with other attempts to take up this call,[38] this book offers a sustained analysis of the complex modalities through which two intellectual projects creatively place European and Islamic traditions at the service of cultural liberation. In so doing, it builds on studies that analyze Arab intellectual formations, not as derivative of colonial European imaginaries or trajectories but as putting colonial Europe at the service of erecting Arab modes of knowledge production in social science (El Shakry 2007; 2017), historiography (Di-Capua 2009), and philosophy (Kersten 2011; Di-Capua 2018; Giordani 2021) and before that, to composing an Arab reading public (Allan 2016; Youssef 2016).

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Enacting Decolonization is motivated by the insight that one of the primary sites of the decolonizing potential in contemporary Arab cultural critique is "the content of its form"—the specific ways this cultural critique formulates and delivers the critical and constructive components of its political vision for a historically and politically situated audience. Thus conceived, this book is less a comprehensive examination of the oeuvres of two preeminent Arab thinkers than a close examination and interrogation of the conceptual, interpretive, and narratological methods they use to undo modes of political thought and practice associated with colonialism and anticolonial nationalism and to instill others in their stead.

Accordingly, each of the following chapters examines one of the four modes of enacting a decolonized subjectivity in Laroui's and Jabri's Arab readers. Each mode is driven by a particular concern that shapes its theoretical argument and performance. I start with *enacting critique*, in which Laroui uses ideology critique and the conceptual offerings of Marxism to give a historically sensitive, theoretically piercing, and relentlessly anticolonial critique of the major currents of modern Arab thought. I then move to *enacting historicity*, in which a mature Laroui shifts from the

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theoretically dense, Marxism-infused register in which he wrote in the 1960s and early 1970s to a more didactic one that attempts to transform his readers into historical agents in the 1980s and 1990s. The third mode, that of *enacting renaissance*, examines Jabri's efforts at instilling in his readers a critical understanding of and relation to the Arab-Islamic tradition. The fourth mode, *enacting mastery*, elucidates the strategies that Jabri mobilizes to reorient his readers toward *turath* by offering an at-once synthetic and analytic account of it.

More specifically, chapter 1 inhabits the moment of critique in two important senses. First, it sheds light on the important and little studied political-intellectual moment of the 1960s and early 1970s that I call *critical reflexive time*. This temporality was proximate enough to anticolonial struggles to retain their concerns and investments, yet distant enough to enable critical reflection. The chapter situates his oft cited but little analyzed early oeuvre in this temporality. It takes its cue from Laroui's adaptation of Marx's searching questions—"Who educates the educator? Who reforms the reformer?"—to reconstruct his early writings as a versatile and sustained attempt to form the political subject of that period: the revolutionary intellectual and political leader. In its second part, the chapter analyzes Laroui's complex and original definition of *ideology* and his inventive deployment of the offerings of ideology critique to provide one of the most theoretically lucid and rhetorically evocative accounts of Islamic reformism, the anticolonial liberalism of the early twentieth century, and the revolutionary nationalism of the interwar and postcolonial periods. The chapter argues that the critical subject is cultivated through the theoretical tools of ideology critique; the narratological tools of characterization; and Laroui's blending of the authorial voices of narrator, commentator, and analyst.

Chapter 2 offers the first English-language examination of Laroui's five-volume *Concepts Series* (1980–1996). It excavates the theoretical and narrative devices that each volume uses to impart to its readers a combination of cultural rootedness and a critical understanding of Islamic and European intellectual histories. Such strategies include staging unlikely but probing encounters between Islamic, Greek, Christian, and liberal traditions of thought; classifying modes of thought based on epistemological rather than cultural similarity; and using such conceptual tropes as the idea of *paradox* to grasp and resolve contradictory understandings of political concepts. Ultimately, the chapter shows that the subject ushered into being through concept-historicization

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and the narrative tropes of paradox is the historicist subject—one that is clear-eyed about its own historicity; attentive to the distinctions among the modes of knowing, being, and living that distinguished the precolonial past from the postcolonial present; and decisive about its future choices.

Chapters 3 and 4 provide a close analysis of Jabri's *Critique of Arab Reason*, the most widely read reconstruction of the Arab-Islamic tradition of the latter twentieth century. Chapter 3, "Enacting Renaissance," focuses on Jabri's formulation of an interpretive method concerned with transforming its Arab readers' relationships to precolonial traditions from nostalgic embracement or refusal to critical anchorage; this is a transformation that constitutes the bases for a new Arab *Nahda*, or renaissance. This "reader-centric" interpretive method is distinct, not only because of its avowedly political upshot, but also for introducing into political theory a mode of interpretation that is less concerned with establishing the historical truth of texts or extracting insights for the present and more focused on the regenerative effects of the interpretive act in and of itself.

Chapter 4, "Enacting Mastery," interprets Jabri's reconstruction of Arab-Islamic intellectual history as featured in the first two volumes of the *Critique*. Although Jabri and his commentators insist that these parts of the *Critique* are strictly epistemological (i.e., concerned with examining Islamic modes of knowledge-production rather than political thought or action), this chapter shows that this epistemic critique has far-reaching political implications for its Arab readership. Namely, I argue that Jabri's method of interpreting the Arab-Islamic tradition should be read less as an attempt to produce accurate interpretations of its juristic, philosophical, and mystic repertoires, and more as a project of fashioning a certain kind of political subject: one anchored in its historical tradition yet able to distance itself from, and therefore to reflect on and critique, both that tradition and its continued influence. I make this case by showing how Jabri draws on structuralism to develop a complex network of conceptual and classificatory schemes. Ultimately, this chapter shifts the analytical lens away from reading the *Critique* as a reconstruction of *turath* and toward interpreting it as a *performance* of how the contemporary Arab political subject should relate to its constitutive pasts.

Finally, the epilogue reflects on the open-ended praxis and experimentation-based character of Laroui's and Jabri's intellectual projects. Whereas the foregoing chapters center the critical implications of

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Laroui's and Jabri's intellectual projects, the epilogue dwells longer on the nonteleological dimensions of their political visions. For Laroui, this manifests in his inventive conception of *cultural specificity*, which he juxtaposes to an elusive and illusionary *cultural authenticity* and whose development is based on theoretical awareness as well as aesthetic experimentation. Likewise, and despite the seeming finality of his reconstructions of the Arab-Islamic tradition, Jabri repeatedly asserts that political praxis, the putting into action of theoretical insights, is the measure of all things political.

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Notes

INTRODUCTION

1 The accurate transliteration of Tarabishi's surname is Tarabīshī. For the sake of accessibility, I will not use the IJMES transliteration scheme to transliterate the names of modern and contemporary Arab thinkers. I will reserve its usage for the transliterations of Arabic-language expressions and concepts.

2 This was Tarabishi's second reading because he was the primary reviewer of the manuscript prior to its publication. In that connection, Tarabishi relates having told Dar al-Ṭalīʿia editor (and economics professor at the American University of Beirut) Bashir al-Daouk, "Publish it immediately! This is a thinker of a European caliber!" ("*Qirāʾatī li-aʿmāl al-jābri kānat ḥiwāran bilā ḥiwār*") (Yahmed 2010).

3 Tarabishi (2015).

4 Tarabishi (2015).

5 For a fuller understanding of the way the category "culture" (*thaqāfa*) is mobilized in Arab intellectual discourse, see the section "Interpretive Lenses" later in this introduction.

6 I refer here to the Arab-Islamic tradition of knowledge production and political rule. For a fuller account of the significance of that tradition in colonial and postcolonial Arab political and intellectual discourse, see the section "Interpretive Lenses."

7 For an account of the disillusionment of this generation of Arab intellectuals, see Kassab (2009), Di-Capua (2018), and Bardawil (2020). For a more general account of this sense of post-revolutionary disillusionment in the postcolony, see Scott (2004).

8 My (implicit) reference here is to Fadi Bardawil's (2020) incisive discussion of the disenchantment of Lebanese (and more generally, Arab) Marxists on the onset of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990).

9 Centre for Arab Unity Studies (2014).

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10 I draw this formulation from Said Graiouid's characterization of the role of the Moroccan intellectual in "The Intellectual as Zaṭāṭ" (Graiouid 2021).

11 Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o (1986).

12 This line of thought is associated with the "clash of civilization" thesis which, as Anne Norton (2013, 195) rightly points out, did not start with Samuel Huntington's (in)famous thesis but dates to "Ernest Renan's literary debates with Jamal al Din al Afghani in nineteenth century Paris."

13 The full Arabic expression for the Arab-Islamic tradition or heritage is *al-turāth al-ʿarabī al-islāmī*. I offer a definition of *turath* and discussion of its relationship with modern Arab culture in the section "Interpretive Lenses" later in the introduction.

14 This includes Arabic-language books about tradition and modernity (*al-turāth wa al-hadātha*) and authenticity and contemporaneity (*al-aṣāla wa al-muʿāṣara*), as well as the English-language writings that offer accounts of that debate in the 1970s–1990s (Boullata 1990) and through the lens of a politics of authenticity (Salvatore 1995; Daifallah 2018; Agbaria 2022; Hassanzadeh 2024).

15 Calls for returning to a past uncontaminated by modern European ideas or social and political modes of organizations have abounded in the Arab and Muslim worlds since the onset of European colonization (and arguably before its physical arrival). See, for example, discussions of the emergence of Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab in the 1800s Arabian Peninsula and al-Senusi in 1800s Libya and Egypt as precolonial reform movements aimed at purifying Muslim lands and peoples (Dallal 1993; Haj 2008), of calls for reform-through-return to the way of the pious predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) by Afghani and Abduh (2015) in the late 1800s, or of calls for a radical break with the present with Sayyid Qutb (1979) in the mid-twentieth century. Yet, insightful analyses of these political visions (especially from the mid-nineteenth century onward) highlight the fundamental ways that they are influenced by their exposure to colonialism's cultural and institutional effects and their aftermath. See, for example, Hourani (1983), Euben (1999), Calvert (2010), Idris (2018; 2022). For an account of the understanding of decolonization as a call for universal humanism that was, of necessity, modern and anticolonial in Arab intellectual discourse, see Abdel-Malek (1977; 1983) and Di-Capua (2018). For a reading of decolonization as a humanism in the South Asian context, see Bannerji (2024); for a reading of postcolonial studies as itself (a humanist) heir to an anticolonial cultural politics, see Alessandrini (2014). What is unique in Laroui's and Jabri's decolonization-of-culture projects is that they are self-conscious (and in Laroui's case, pragmatic and instrumentalist) about their adoption of anticolonial modernity (in its Marxist, revolutionary, socialist iteration) as their guiding rubric.

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16 This marks the salient way "decolonial" is used in scholarly and activist circles alike and posited in calls for "decolonizing the university" and "decolonizing knowledge" by positing the possibility of undoing or spontaneously overcoming the effects of post-Enlightenment European thought in all its hues and altogether. Often, such calls draw on (simplified and vulgarized) versions of the concepts of coloniality and decoloniality introduced by US-based Latin American critical theorists in the late 1990s and early 2000s. See, for example, the writings of Quijano (2000), Mignolo (2002b) and their development by Maldonado-Torres (2007).

17 For an account of this problematic, see Di-Capua (2018, 10).

18 The expression *colonial modernity*, first formulated by Tani Barlow (1997), and the similar term *modernity/coloniality*, developed by Quijano and Mignolo a decade later, recently became commonplace ways of referring to colonialism and modernity as two mutually constitutive historical processes (see Barlow 1997; Quijano 2007; and Mignolo 2011**.** That said, and as we will see in chapter 1, Laroui uses the expression *colonial rationality* to connote the colonial character of modern reason as early as 1974.

19 For examples of Arab modernism as an aesthetic in poetry, literature, and film, see Creswell (2019), Selim (2004), and Limbrick (2020), respectively.

20 To be sure, *modernity* is a broad and multifaceted term. For purposes of charting how it relates to contemporary Arab thought, I define it skeletally and provisionally in two interrelated registers: ideationally and sociologically. As a frame-of-thought or what Connolly (1988) refers to as *the modern frame* and Charles Taylor (2007) as the *immanent frame*, modernity is an epoch that centers a "set of contending understandings of self, responsibility, knowledge, rationality, freedom, (mastery over) nature, and legitimacy" and in so doing "shuffles other possible perspectives out of active consideration" (Connolly 1988, 4). Sociologically, I follow Giddens (1991) helpful heuristic in delineating modernity as "institutions and modes of behavior established first in post-Feudal Europe, but which in the twentieth century have become world-historical in their impact" (Giddens 1991, 16). Institutions of modernity include "industrialism, capitalism, surveillance, and the nation-state," and its modes of behavior include "the separation of space and time, the dis-embedding of social institutions and self-reflexivity" (Giddens 1991, 16–19). In their turn, these sociological institutions and behaviors are intimately related to the central concepts of modernity (self, freedom, nature, rationality, rationalization) to which Connolly refers.

21 The understanding of modernity and the Enlightenment as an attitude of self-critique is one we find in Foucault's (1984) reflection on Kant's (1983) essay "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment," in which

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Foucault ends with, "It seems to me that Kant's reflection is even a way of philosophizing that has not been without its importance or effectiveness during the last two centuries. The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (1984, 49).

22 For a conceptual history of liberal understandings of self-determination, see Chappell (2005). For an account of Marx's understanding of *human emancipation*, see Marx's (1978a), Marx (1978c), and Le Baron (1971). For critical accounts of how these concepts have been adapted by anticolonial thinkers, see Wilder (2015) and Getachew (2019).

23 The proper transliteration of these thinkers' names is, respectively, ʿAbdallāh al-ʿArwī and Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jāberī. I have chosen to use the most-common European-language variants of their names to facilitate connecting their thought to the available secondary sources and translations of their work.

24 For Laroui, these include the prestigious and hefty "Cultural Personality of the Year" award from the United Arab Emirates in 2017. It also includes the Institut du Monde Arabe's and Muhammad V University's special event in honor of Laroui in 2018 (the first of a series of events to revive the Chair of Arab Studies that Laroui helped found in 1991), as well as the instatement of a Chair of Abdallah Laroui in the College of Arts and Humanities at Muhammad V University in January 2020 (again with the support of the Institut du Monde Arabe). All took place in jam-packed events, whose constituents were markedly youthful—a sign, as Idriss Jebari (2020) points out, of "the post-Arab uprising's generation's search and thirst for intellectual masters, and to learn more about the 1970s, a period of political repression, but also, perhaps paradoxically, of cultural efflorescence of literary/political publications." As for Jabri, he was three-time awardee of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) prizes. He famously turned down a slew of monetary prizes from the President of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, and the head of state of Libya, Muammar Gaddafi, as well as repeated offers to become a member of the Moroccan Royal Academy (of which Laroui was part) to retain his integrity as a member of the socialist opposition (Al Arabiya 2008).

25 Laroui (2005).

26 Idriss Jebari (2020) captures this recent surge of interest in Laroui as both an intellectual and a Moroccan cultural symbol in a series of articles tellingly titled "The Great Return."

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27 Respectively, "Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri-Morocco" (Al Jazeera Documentary 2015) and "Kitāb Naqd al-ʿAql al-ʿArabī" (On the Book: The Critique of Arab Reason) (Al Jazeera 2019).

28 As Laroui (Jadaliyya 2012) and some of his critics (Hassanzadeh 2025) note that, in the early 2000s, Laroui's political stance shifted toward explicit support for a constitutionalist, liberal democratic Moroccan monarchy as a guarantor of political secularism and stability—a position he reiterated in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, including Morocco's February 20 movement. Rather than signaling a reversal of the revolutionary democratic vision he articulated in the 1970s, I interpret this as an expression of Laroui's continued—and by the 2000s, more understated—commitment to a Marxist historicism that emphasizes the necessity of passing through the stages of social, economic, and political development (particularly those of liberal capitalism) as a precondition for transcending them. Importantly, Laroui adopts this position while remaining acutely aware of the formidable challenges posed by a still-imperialist global order, and he offers specific theoretical ways for addressing these challenges by drawing on Marxist humanism (Laroui 1976b; 2006). As I discuss in chapter 2, this approach constitutes a throughline in Laroui's work from the early 1970s to the 2010s, although it is expressed in varying idioms across time.

29 As an intellectual and political movement, Arab nationalism's roots go back to the nineteenth-century Eastern provinces of the Ottoman empire (Greater Syria, Iraq, then-Egypt) and was directed at both Ottoman (Turkish) rule as well colonial encroachment. The iteration of Arab nationalism I refer to here is the revolutionary one that emerged in the interwar period and gained regional discursive ascendance in 1950s and 1960s, first with the ascent of the Arab nationalist Ba'ath Party power in postcolonial Syria, then with President of Egypt Gamal Abdel Nasser Hussein's adoption of Arab socialism as Egypt's ruling rubric. For an account of late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century Arab nationalism, see Khalidi et al. (1991). For an account of Pan-Arabism's emergence in the interwar period, see Dawn (1988).

30 I refer here to the title of White's (1987) book *The Content of the Form*.

31 Consider, in this connection, seminal twentieth-century works that use the term *culture* in their title, such as the doyen of Arab letters' Hussein's (1938) classic *Mustaqbal al-Thaqāfa fi Miṣr* (*The Future of Culture in Egypt*), in which *culture* denotes both identity and the resources that form it; the Egyptian philosopher Zaki Najib Maḥmoud's (1976) *Thaqāfatunā fi muwājahat al-ʿasr* (*Our Culture Confronts the Age*), in which culture refers to Arab-Islamic intellectual tradition and its manifestations in the present; or Laroui's (2017a) *Thaqāfatunā fi ḍaw' al-tarīkh* (*Our Culture in the Light of History*), in which culture refers to a history

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("European," "national," "traditional," "liberal," etc.) reflecting the various stages of modern Arab thought.

32 Early Islamic reformers, such as Rifa'a Al-Tahtawi, Jamal Ad-din Al-Afghani, and Muhammad 'Abduh, all believed there to be a problem of "decline" within the Ottoman Empire (Hourani 1983, 104). In a similar vein, the secular nationalist thinker Michel 'Aflaq notes in 1959 that "the Arabs have been living a period of decadence for several centuries, and not just since their colonization by the West" (Aflaq 1983, 148). Commenting on and critiquing these trends, Massad (2007) drawing on Reinhard Schulze, notes that nineteenth-century Arab intellectuals accepted the Orientalist thesis that the eighteenth century marked a period of decadence and used it to authorize their own cultural production during the *Nahda* (cultural renaissance).

33 First coined by Dallmayr (1997) and Euben (1997), comparative political theory sought to reclaim "an older, yet never quite lost, understanding of theory as inherently comparative" (Euben 1999, xi) and to urge political theorists to "shun spectatorial allure and assume the more modest stance of co-participant in the search for truth: by opening mind and heart to the puzzling diversity of human experiences-and also to the possibility of jeopardizing cherished preconceptions or beliefs" (Dallmayr 1997, 422). Broadly speaking, it features works that compare modern European political visions with non-European ones, including Chinese, Indian, Indigenous (Nichols 2019; Temin 2023), and Islamic (Euben 1999; Idris 2018) perspectives; includes in-depth studies of each of these traditions of thought on their own terms in the premodern (El Amine 2015) and modern periods (Thomas 2012; Jenco 2010, 2015); and is carried out in critical, historical, and normative theoretical registers. Although much of comparative political theory is approached in a critical theoretical and intellectual historical modes, some studies conduct their analysis in a more analytic, stipulative mode. Examples include Andrew March's (2009a) and Mohammad Fadel's (2008) works on the compatibility of Islamic and liberal modes of governance and Joseph Kaminski's (2021) critique of their compatibility and his proposition about a perfectionist model of Islamicate public reason that draws on the analytical tools of recent Confucian political theory (Kaminski 2025). Studies in comparative political theory also feature methodological interventions on the "comparative" character of that subfield (Euben 1999; March 2009b) and on if and how the enterprise of comparative political theory should be executed (Godrej 2009; Idris 2016; Seth 2017).

34 I say "renewed" because the study of rhetoric and politics has been a staple of the history of political thought. This includes the works of

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classicists, such as Kennedy (1963; 1972); feminist readings of that tradition, such as Jarratt (1991); and more-recent studies of the classical rhetorical tradition as works of political theory, such as Connolly (2007) and Zetzel's (2022) argument about the importance of rhetoric in the Roman republican context by examining Cicero's works.

35 For various versions of this call, including the relationship between critical theory (i.e., deconstruction, power and knowledge, subject formation) and rhetoric, see the various entries in Gaonkar and Topper's (2022) *The Oxford Handbook of Rhetoric and Political Theory*.

36 I emphasize here that I do not read these texts as abstract philosophical works; their political theoretical force is precisely a product of their sensitivity and responsiveness to their contexts. As Wilder writes about Césaire and Fanon, I read these texts as "metahistorical artifacts that require close readings within a sociopolitical framework" (2005, 34). That said, whereas, true to the historian's task, Wilder uses Césaire's and Fanon's texts "as historical documents that disclose and reflect on historical problems," I read them as historically situated attempts to theorize and enact a liberated political subject.

37 Such a modality of reading might strike us as characteristic of political theory's conception of interpretation—stressing the importance of reading texts closely, generously, sympathetically—and aimed at attaining a deeper understanding but also and, oftentimes, at discerning in historical texts potential relevance for present political problems no matter how remote (in time and space) these texts might be. What strikes us as a commonplace interpretive practice with regards to "the canon" tends not to be less prevalent modalities for reading anticolonial and postcolonial texts, which, when not read for their critiques of Eurocentrism (as Getachew and Mantena note), are often read as "essentialist nativists or naïve humanists" (2021, 8). These are two interpretive tropes that Wilder uses to describe common readings of Césaire and Senghor but that might well be used to describe common readings of nineteenth-century Arab thought as epistemically beholden to post-Enlightenment Europe's privileging of rationality as the precondition for subjectivity at the heart of the birth of Arab identity (Sheehi 2004).

38 One such notable project is Giordani's (2021, 185) sustained and incisive intellectual history of the revival of classical Islamic philosophy (*falsafa*) by twentieth-century Egyptian philosophers—a project that, for one of its main progenitor's, Mahmud Samy Al-Nashshar, was "a political project aimed at furnishing an authentic epistemological foundation for the restructuring of self and society demanded by decolonization."

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