



**On History and
Memory in Arab
Literature and
Western Poetics**

Edited by

**Bootheina Majoul
and Yosra Amraoui**

*With an Introduction by
Cathy Caruth*

On History and Memory in Arab Literature and Western Poetics

Edited by

Bootheina Majoul and Yosra Amraoui

With an Introduction by Cathy Caruth

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



2020

CHAPTER 1

REPRESENTATIONS OF HISTORY IN TIMES OF REVOLUTION

MOHAMED SALAH OMRI

In the Arab world, the revolutions of 2011 renewed interest in the French revolution of 1848 and the *Spring of Peoples* (as they were known by many Europeans at the time) as a whole. Beyond the perils of looking to nineteenth-century Europe for models to explain radical movements that took place in Africa and the Middle East in the 21st century, perils which are embedded in discourses I will critique in the course of the present essay, there are parallels which cannot be ignored, particularly with regard to the Tunisian case which inaugurated the movement. Elements of surprise, the types of alliances, people's demands and the aftermath of the revolution, to name but a few features, have been pointed out. 1989 in Eastern Europe was also evoked, and, to a lesser extent, Iran of 1979.¹ The achievements and setbacks of 1848 are dissected by Karl Marx with authority and depth in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where he appeals to metaphors and literary figures, perhaps in some kind of echo of Lamartine's "poetic" appeal for a Peoples' Spring.

The material conditions and the social bases of 1848 and its aftermath, and indeed those pertaining to Arab revolutions, are not my concern here.²

¹ In terms of personalities, an intriguing parallel was drawn between Napoleon Bonaparte and the Tunisian Islamist leader Rached Ghanouchi within the context of the 2011 revolution by the sociologist Mouldi Guessoumi in his book *Society of the Revolution* (2015, 261-266). The personal and political itineraries of both men are somewhat closely matched. For example, both men were exiled abroad, formulated their alliances, returned triumphantly home and reactivated their bases and won elections. But what interests me here is the manner in which both men – as narratives – are indicative of temporalities which were accelerated and accentuated by the revolutionary moment.

² Several people have done that, including Guessoumi, Hedi Timoumi and Ahmed Jdey for Tunisia, Gilbert Achcar and others for the region as a whole.

What I retain is Marx's interest in the temporalities of the French revolution and its aftermath. He explains the two seemingly contradictory temporalities played out in 19th century France: "A whole nation which thought it had acquired an accelerated power of motion by means of a revolution, suddenly finds itself set back into a defunct epoch, and to remove any doubt about the relapse, the old dates arise again – the old chronology, the old names, the old edicts, which had long since become a subject of antiquarian scholarship, and the old minions of the law who had seemed long dead" (Marx 1986, 97). Marx was attempting to dispel two discourses of the time: one which rationalised sudden radical change by appealing to the past for guidance and evidence while the other argued that in times of change the survival of the dead haunts the living. He asserts: "Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their content" (99). Yet, in order to arrive at their own content, he argues, the revolutions of the nineteenth century must let "the dead bury their dead" (99). He was speaking of a time when workers, for the first time in history, rebelled *for* themselves. In the Arab region, during the colonial period, revolutions did not so much target a social class as they did an outside force, and therefore had to seek allies and compromises across social strata. The 2011 revolutions in the Arab region bear a combination of the two types, being postcolonial and social, country-specific and transnational, all at once. No wonder, then, that discourses as well as cultural practices, since the early days of 2011, have witnessed bewildering diversity which cannot be restricted to the conflict between the old and the new, or the national and the global, as one would expect in a revolutionary moment. This complexity will be explored through the two key terms, history and representation.

Three broad conceptions of history inform and guide the present essay. Hayden White (2010) speaks of narrativity of history or historical narrative as literary representation; Karl Marx famously talked about the transformation of history, or history as a human agency, which includes among others, revolutions; the medieval historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) (1999) saw in the *longue durée* of the history of nations cause for meditation and reflection (*al-nadhar wa al-i'tibar*). The three are, in my view, linked by dialectic, or even a continuum, through which we may be able to explore the bewildering times in which we live. In terms of narrative, during most of the paper, I will be in the company of Hayden White, although not always explicitly. Marx is lurking underneath as befitting someone who tried to uncover the inner working of history. Ibn

Khaldun, as befitting lessons, is what I conclude with.³ Representation of history is understood widely, starting with the academic horizons within which revolutions have been received, followed by a critique of methods and approaches, and concluding with a critical account of specific instances of representation. In some cases, the representation takes the form of coordinated, or even institutionalised, effort. This is the case with transitional justice processes and truth commissions. The present essay explores these through transitional justice in Tunisia, under the heading “transitional time and archival anxiety”, where I study the tension between local historiography and truth-telling mechanisms of transitional justice.

Temporalities in Conflict

I start with a paradox, which seems to me unique but overlooked. Since 2011, the Arab region has been experiencing two broad attitudes or movements. We have, on one side, the systematic annihilation of the human past (destruction of archaeological sites, repression of historical thinking, banning of modern ways of life, attempts at establishing enclaves governed by the imagined radical rule of by-gone times in places like Iraq, Syria, Libya). This created a perception that the Arab region became the graveyard of the humanities or the place where the humanities come to die. Some of its manifestations include violence against the human sciences, the arts, heritage, creativity and rational knowledge, an increase in violent hostility towards the humanities and humanity itself. Discourse banning arts, destruction of archaeological sites and attacks against artists spread beyond their traditional hubs in the area, to reach societies known for their relative openness, such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Tunisia. But if these acts witnessed an expansion in the aftermath of 2011 uprisings, the starting point of systematic destruction in the past three decades was, in my view, the attack against Iraq -or more accurately, the attack against humanity in Iraq- in 2003. All of this has been happening at a time of religious authoritarianism, compounded by extended political authoritarianism, financial corruption and pervasive consumerism.

³ The main sources relevant to what I discuss here include Hayden White, “Storytelling, historical and ideological” (2010); Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1869 edition), where he is at his most literary mode and where, appropriately to my account here, he scorns “so-called objective historians” for ignoring the underlying class struggle at work and focussing instead on exceptional individuals and heroes; and Ibn Khaldun, who unveils the dangers of ideological uses and explores his philosophy of history in the Introduction to his book *al-Ibar*.

On the other side, we observe in this same region the rebirth of subjectivity or communal and individual attempts to impact the course of history constructively. The Arab world became a place which is witnessing the birth or the re-launching of concepts of human dignity, freedom and justice, which are the foundations of the humanities and its ultimate goal. Indeed, the 2011 rebellions signalled a creative moment in the wide sense of the term, that is, an explosion of creativity and imagination, and the emergence of new actors and new forms of expression, which gave the world hope in the possibility of acting in history anew. Unchained creativity has affected literature as well as the visual and performing arts. Broadly speaking, the first attitude may be said to represent forces aiming at ending human history and the restoring of a presumed divine order or a utopian past, while the other can be understood as a form of beginning in the sense that revolutions are usually based on the idea of making history and intervening in the shaping of the future.

These attitudes, which in fact amount to ways of being in the world, are simultaneous and, therefore, in interaction with one another on a daily basis and across walks of life. That interaction varies in intensity and range, from benign personal choices to deadly conflict and outright annihilation of the other. The present essay explores manifestations of these attitudes in a variety of sources and reflects on the ways in which the past is remembered and mobilised by all sides and more importantly, and more poignantly, when what is remembered is supposed to be a shared history. The Tunisian philosopher, Zeineb Cherni (2017), Leftist militant before the Tunisian revolution and active citizen since, has reflected on this in terms of temporalities. She argues: "The course of history in Tunisia submits to a stratification of temporalities. The post-historical temporality is fragmented. In Tunisia, and for some, we are witnessing an a-presence in the present or a non-contemporaneity in the present... Allegiance, which is a threat to the principles of the republic, would result in reclaiming passeist social models which would legitimate an ultra-subjective violence to exterminate the other" (22). The clash of temporalities is neither new nor unique to Tunisia. The "fragmented temporality", mentioned above, can be detected in the explosion of forms of representation, made possible through globalised means of communication and the privatisation of forums of expression, as I explain below.

But a discussion of representation of the Arab world is bound to recall Said's *Orientalism* (1978). And here, two key ideas must be born in mind, namely, the idea of the East as already read and representation in the sense of speaking for or on behalf of someone. Up to the revolutions of 2011, the

dominant assumption in Western perceptions of the Arab region had been, arguably, that the people and cultures of the region were known or knowable. *Known* to the western mind and knowable to its capacity to study the other because it can (it is capable intellectually, and it has the means: institutions, access, etc.). And this other is *knowable* because these societies are seen as simple, even primitive. This knowledge is also thought to be the only valid one because natives are seen as unable to produce knowledge about themselves, or at least not the right kind of knowledge. This leads to the second point, which is mentioned in the epigraph of *Orientalism*, a quote from Marx: "They cannot represent themselves: they must be represented". It must be noted that Said was not really focussed on the Orient's representation of itself or self-representation, and much less on Marx, but instead on demonstrating the hollowness of the position and claims outlined above. Self-representation is closely related to history, for on it rests subjectivity. On some level, then, revolution is a form of self-representation, of acting on history as subjects. It is a form of the marginalized speaking and doing, or of the damned of the earth, to recall Frantz Fanon, taking matters in their own hands, seeing the glimpse of a world in which they would be damned no longer. Tunisians, Egyptians, Yemenis, Libyans, Syrians... acted out of what the late Tunisian historian Ahmed Jdey (2012) called "collective pain" or, in the words of Fredric Jameson, in another context: experiencing history as a hurt. Much of course has been built on representation and constitutes responses which range from postcolonial theory to decolonial thinking. But what is really central to the problem is not only representation but presence, by which I mean subjectivity or the capacity to act on history, to affect its direction. National liberation movements, varied as they have been, can be seen from this perspective; post-colonial revolutions are another case in point.

Ambitious Times, Limited Methodologies

Yet to grasp what happened in 2011, academic analysts and pundits alike resorted to images of coloured or scented revolutions (jasmine, Spring, Facebook, etc.) or theories of exceptionalism; some even evoked manipulation and conspiracy. The events of 2011 were first seen within a specific horizon and expressed in images fit for that horizon. Michael Hudson (2012) argues that this horizon was shaped by "group-think, theoretical tunnel vision, ideological agendas, insufficient attention to the work of Arab intellectuals, and a lack of multidisciplinary approach" to the study of the Arab region (22-23). According to this mindset, "authoritarianism in

the region is durable, democracy is an inappropriate goal and is impossible to reach in the Arab region, and populations are passive, either due to rentier state policies or coercion" (26-27). In all cases, little attention, or regard, has been given to the social movements, protest culture, patterns of resistance and alternative imaginaries which had been at work in the Arab region all through the pre-2011 period. In such scholarship, at best we are dealing with what Marx dismissed, with disdain, as the "so-called objective historians", those who ignore the underlying social struggle at work and focus instead on exceptional individuals and heroes, or, worse, on single Arab dictators.

In light of the above, I argue that the translation of collective pain into collective action, regardless of its aftermath, demands appropriate academic response. The failure of knowledge of the kind I describe earlier should make us think of different ways of knowing, and different positioning in relation to the Arab region and people, as well as to history and to representation. Some of what I outline here is known, but little of it is actually translated into method. Revolutions authorize revision, not only of national narratives but also of academic methods and theory. They challenge the validity of paradigms which have proven not paradigmatic enough, unproductive, obsolete, or outright biased.⁴

I am advocating an attitude, which could be summarised in three terms: Listening, solidarity, and critique. By listening, I mean pedagogy of learning rather than teaching. I see my role – and here I speak from a particular position - as that of solidarity, which prevents me from participating in perpetuating censorship through certain discursive academic practices which obscure and often seek to replace those it should enable. Therefore, my work, the present essay included, is conceived, in part, as a forum for free expression not yet one more prison house of language. In the Tunisian case, and more widely, the rebelling people liberated my voice, and I feel the need to acknowledge that. That gratitude should not, of course, preclude critique and rigour; but neither should it fall into the traps of privilege and narcissism of the kind we see all too often in academic practice. In addition, the people and cultures under study have reflected

⁴ The state of the field of Arabic studies in European and North American universities is a good place to observe the East as known and as knowable, after observing it as an ornament during the dominance of Orientalism, as I explain in the paper, "The study of the Arab world and Islam in the United States and Britain in the context of the "war on terror" (in Arabic) (Omri 2011). Here, I speak critically of four features, which characterised this field over the past three decades, namely, expansion, securitization, ethnification and corporatization.

on, and produced knowledge, not only about their societies, but also about humanity as a whole. That knowledge needs to be acknowledged and given the status it deserves. This is the proper domain of decoloniality and the search for global epistemic justice.⁵

The 2011 revolutions brought the values and positions mentioned above to the fore and made possible new global thinking as well as appropriate methodologies. And it is in this spirit that I have joined efforts with a team of academics over the past several years to work on Arab revolutions and New Humanism. The inaugural exploration of the methodological challenges posed by 2011 was the special dossier of the journal *boundary 2*, vol.39, no.1 of 2012 where Ronald A. Judy and I took upon ourselves the task of listening to how Tunisians made sense of their revolution through their own eyes. Judy notes, in the introduction to the dossier, that “the Tunisian writings collected here intimate the emergence of a collective intelligence and imagination along the lines of something else, the new humanism Fanon detected in the revolutionary moments of Africa some sixty years ago” (16). One of the fitting methods for new humanism is confluency or *tarafud*. I will return to New Humanism in the conclusion. For now, I wanted to draw attention to what I mean by *tarafud*.

As a reaction to the one-sided and dated concept of influence prevalent in comparative literature, I propose in a 2006 book, the theory and practice of confluence between literatures, languages and methodologies (Omri 2006). The basic idea is that modern Arabic literature, which is my main research interest, is the result of a complex relationship with Western literatures and Arab-Islamic and local heritage, as well as the moment of writing: it is the locus of confluence of a diversity of sources. These result in texts which require sensitivity to the multiplicity of styles and of languages, a methodology which, in disciplinary terms, draws on the focus of area studies on linguistic competence and contextual knowledge on the one hand, but also on a comparative literature aware of global and transnational aspects, including theoretical insights from multiple global sites. More recently, I have been dissatisfied with this term (i.e., confluence) and looked to Arabic for an equivalent with added complexity.

The term *tarafud* is what I came up with (I explore it fully in my essay “Towards a theory of *tarafud*: the poetics and ethics of comparison” (2015 in Arabic). *Tarafud* is a term that does not exist as such in Arabic but is

⁵ For an overview of decoloniality scholarship, see, “Decoloniality as the Future of Africa, Sabelo” J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015 in *History Compass*, 13/10, 485-496.

coined based on a blending of confluence and *rafid*, confluence in the sense of flowing with and *rafid* which suggests support and generosity. *Tarafud* is then a concept that describes the relationships among world literatures, away from hierarchy, domination and one-dimensional traffic. It also describes ideas of giving and hospitality. In the term confluence, “con” refers to the Latin root “with,” but could also recall opposition and tension or contradiction, alluding to tension as one way in which languages and cultures relate. Confluency can perhaps convey both and could render, in a fitting way, the coined *tarafud*. The coinage puts Latin-based and Saxon languages alongside Arabic, not in a translational way but in a constitutive manner. *Tarafud* recognises the multiplicity and diversity of the creative act. It also accepts the principle of contribution and accumulation regardless of linguistic source, genre and style. In the context of the present paper, *tarafud* allows a critique of existing representations and their methodological bases. It is conceived as a form of distribution of knowledge, which accepts, as *constitutive*, the validity of knowledge and of the experience in which knowledge is based regardless of location. This form of hospitality or hospitability rejects the spirit of the already read, mentioned above. It is also applied to explain the confluence of global and local imagery, political stakes and ideologies in order to account for ways in which history has been conceived and represented.⁶

Representations of History

The manifestations of representations of history, if we restrict ourselves to the context of Arab revolutions, are too numerous to account for here. Since 2011, history has become available for free representation on unprecedented scale, leading to explosion in representation. I must stress that the important point in historical narrative, as Hayden White tells us, is that the genre or type of “story-writing” is key, and it is the element through which ideology is expressed. A historical event may be narrated as a tragedy or a comedy bound with the ideology of the form of representation itself. It is for this reason that in this incursion into what is a

⁶ I have since used *tarafud* in a number of places, including thinking about world literature, trade unionism and political music in Tunisia, and in literature and memory. For example, Tunisian historiography is used alongside other historiographies, not excluding them. In terms of ideas on representation of trauma, we would do well listening to those who experienced prison and torture and reflected upon them in writing, like political prisoners Ammar Mansour and Gilbert Naccache from Tunisia, for example, alongside insights from theorists Judith Butler, Cathy Caruth and others, and writers Coetzee and others.

vast field, I pay special attention to the narrative form, the style and the language in which history is told. Here then, I gather some of the representations under metaphors, plot types or narrative styles, which seem to me salient, with no attempt at comprehensive survey. History as a *revenge narrative* by those who saw in the turn of events a licence to take revenge on old foes and their narratives; history as a *story of retribution*, a chance to hold to account bearers of the defeated historical narratives; history as *redemption story* by which those castigated as being on the wrong side of history are finally redeemed; the narrative of *divine destiny* by which the beginning of Islam, especially the caliphate rule, is recalled as model for our time; the *utopian fable* of total equality for all in the eyes of unreformed Marxists; history embodied in *the enlightened despot* whose mission is to save the nation from chaos and regression...⁷ In what follows, I highlight a limited number of these broad trends captured in images, events and statements. These range from the parochially local to the famously global. But in all cases, they have been globally disseminated and traded.

Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo* and *Disaster Capitalism*, noted the obscenity of one inaugural event of the 21st century, namely, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, in an article titled “Smoking while Iraq burns” published in November 2004. In the image, we could observe the devastation of a nation marketed as manly pleasure and corporation profit. Yet resting to smoke a Marlboro cigarette while watching Babylon go up in smoke, so to speak, is not very different from chanting *Allahu Akbar* while axing Palmyra statues or bombarding the Buddha shrine in Afghanistan, burning the Sidi Bou Said shrine in Tunisia or mutilating a woman statue in Setif in Algeria. In fact, it could be argued that the latter are mere copycats, mimicking or are cultural appropriations of the former. Jihadi John (notice the name!); the human-heart eater in Syria and others, talk the talk and walk the swagger of a Rambo or a Terminator. Similar iconography – and the same means – is deployed in the bid to terminate the work of human history. That work is called idols *asnam* or *awthan*, pagan representations of *shirk* [idolatry] famously destroyed by Prophet Muhammad when he entered Mecca. While the American army blew up al-Amiriyya shelter or Falluja to presumably “purge” Iraq of “enemy combatants” (notice the name again!) and non-existent weapons of mass destruction, al-Qaida and

⁷ One example in Tunisia, a leader of al Nahda party has famously celebrated the advent of the 6th *caliphate* as the outcome of the revolution, predicted by what he called a “divine sign”. See the speech here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pP0OL5iRZNg>

ISIS jihadists set about purging Islam itself of “alien” practices, and pagan rites, majority beliefs and minority ways of life.

But these are by no means the only forces or methods to affect history. The rebellious spirit across the Arab region, and the chaos which followed, threatened the very bases of legitimacy and control of nations that have not witnessed rebellions, such as some Gulf States. One way these have responded even well before 2011 is what I call history on steroids. History has a certain pace and revolutions accelerate it, to recall Cherni and Engels. But some are tempted to do that acceleration by other means: The mega literary and cultural prizes, the mega-museums, the Ivy league universities on the sand, the expensive art collections, the massive military interventions, either directly or by proxy, which reduced Yemen or Syria to rubble and wreaked havoc elsewhere; the World football Cup, the big sports teams, even speedy liberalisation of codes regulating the lives of women; all have marked state policies in Qatar, UAE, and Saudi Arabia in particular. The faster and the bigger access to the global history stage the better. The underlying logic in this attitude is that a place in history is, like everything else, a commodity which money should be able to buy. There are numerous literary comments on this. In the novel *al-Na'na' al-Barri* by Anissa Abboud (2004), a poet is brought to ruin and finally driven to madness because he refused petrodollar prizes and compromises. “You’ve got a pound, you’re worth a pound’. The proverb did not say: a diploma = being human. It says: a pound = being human”, he says (426). “Antara al-nafti” (literally, Oil Antara or Petro Antara) by Zakaria Tamer (1963) is another apt metaphor.⁸ Likewise, acceleration and scale brought to the fore a more gendered history. We observe the return of masculinity and the rise of re-energized feminism at the same time across the world: Donald Trump vs. MeToo; million-woman March in the U.S and Women’s day in Spain; Saudi women under Muhammad Ibn Salman, ISIS women slaves (*sabaya*) in Syria; equality in inheritance law in Tunisia; stricter abortion laws in the United States...

In academia, the return of history has energized historiography, including sustained reflections and several seminars and publications by Abdeljelil Temimi, Hedi Timoumi, Fethi Lisir and the work by ISHCT in Tunisia; important interventions by Hashem Salih (2013), Alain Badiou (2011) and many others, elsewhere. At the heart of this revival is the issue of truth

⁸The short story *Antara al-Nafti* by Syrian writer Zakaria Tamer recalls the epic black hero and poet, Antar al-Absi of pre-Islamic Arabia, and sets him in a modern consumer oil economy.

claims and revision of national narrative. And this is why controversy between historians and truth commissions and transitional justice professionals has become prominent. The Tunisian Truth and Dignity Commission, better known by its French acronym IVD, is a case in point. The conflict became clear from day one. And one of the earliest figures to raise the complexity and dangers surrounding rewriting national history was historian Abdeljelil Temimi who asked for historians to lead the process, noting the political nature of transitional justice in Tunisia, including the issue of the fate of the archives of the nation. This was occasioned in part by failed attempt by IVD to remove the Presidential archives on 26 December 2014 and put them under its control. In an interview to *al-Maghreb* newspaper on 23 March 2017, the historian notes that the Commission was not qualified to write history since it lacked the expertise and the methodology to handle historical evidence, having no historians among its staff. He accused the Commission of performing “an ideological, vengeful task for the benefit of one particular political side”, by which he meant the Islamist al Nahda party, who have been promoting a reading of history in which independent Tunisia and its liberation from colonialism would be seen in a different light.⁹

Transitional Time and Archival Anxiety

The law gives the IVD the right to see, and indeed requisition any document relevant to its work; and it is on this basis that it sought the Presidential archive (Lamont, Christopher K. and Boujeh, Hela 2012, 32-49). Experts and several civil society organizations questioned this right and argued that the archive should be secure and in neutral hands (in this case in The Office of National Archive) because it serves more than transitional justice. Everyone cried foul and in the end the archive was not removed. In my view, the debate stems from the highly contentious and easily politicised and instrumentalised uses of memory and transitional justice. The confusion has to do with two issues related to history and conceptions of time. Transitional justice could be seen as an attempt to break the relationship with the past and control it through revision and correction. This action takes practical forms such as confession, accountability, restitution, reconciliation, forgiveness, and active support of recollection and remembering (memorialisation, etc.). All these steps are important, indeed necessary, in order to construct a different future in states which emerge from traumatic pasts and seek democratisation. The

⁹ <http://ar.lemaghreb.tn> , 23 March 2017, accessed 12.10. 2018.

relationship between these and memory and history is too obvious to state. On the other hand, transnational justice, specifically because it is transitional, is governed by time. It is limited by a time frame, which may be long or short, but is in all cases finite; otherwise neither the term transitional nor the whole enterprise would have a meaning. In Tunisia, the work of the IVD was limited by law to four years. The timeframe to be covered was set as 1 July 1955 to 2013, for reasons which are too complex to treat here.¹⁰ The issue of the archive can be situated in this context. For in light of the above, archive is essential to Transitional Justice (TJ) as well as to historiography.

In summary, TJ, in general, refers to the temporary, the individual/subjective, the concrete and the legal, even when it acts on what is called memorialisation by means of street names, erecting memorials and other symbolic acts. Yet perhaps the best thing about TJ is that it is temporary, and therein reside its strength and effectiveness. It is built on a form of certitude linked to the concept of law and its work. History, on the other hand, is written using different tools and pays little regard to the limitations of time either on the past or in the future. History, whether personal or national, is multiple and subject to debate and interpretation. One could perhaps say that while TJ seeks forgetting, history works on remembering.

For all these reasons, the relationship between truth commissions and historians has been fraught with tension, such as a controversy between the IVD and Tunisian historians. In March 2018, and as the anniversary of the country's independence was approaching, the President of the Commission announced she was going to publish documents which cast doubt on the independence of the country itself. Sixty historians, including prominent figures such as Hedi Timoumi, Fethi Lisir, Abdelhamid Heniya and Mounira Chabato Remadi signed a petition on 26 March 2018 to intervene in the bitter debate occasioned by the IVD's release of documents relevant to Tunisia's independence and the bid by IVD to extend its work by one more year.¹¹ The key point of the petition was to make the case for Tunisian historiography both as a force against dictatorship in the past and as the right authority to rewrite the national narrative "responsibly" at a

¹⁰ <http://www.ihej.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Loi-justice-transitionnelle-Tunisie.pdf>. For a brief legal critique of the law see, <http://www.legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=643&lang=ar>. The law governing the Commission and TJ is Law 53 for 2013, 14 Dec 2013.

¹¹ <http://ar.lemaghreb.tn>, 26 March 2018, accessed on 10.10.2018.

time of continued conflict over memory. According to these historians, the current IVD President was a political tool that divided, rather than united, the nation. The petition set out to respond to several statements and actions by IVD designed, in their view, to “belittle” historians, ignore them or coerce them into falling in line with its perspective. They also demonstrate that the presumed newly-discovered documents were actually neither new nor as important as they were made to be. Like Temimi, these historians accused Ben Sedrine of settling scores with the legacy of President Bourguiba and “the founders of the national independent state”. On the other hand, the historians restate their commitment to “objective truth” in the face of attempts to using “the wounds of the past politically and as a booty”. Regardless of issues of right or wrong or of legitimacy, the thrust of the dispute is really about truth claims and the suitability to serve as “custodian of truth”.

Historians, such as Hedi Timoumi in his latest book, *To Arab Politicians: Hands off Our History!* (2017), fear a history based on what he calls the selectivity of memory of the kind promoted by IVD and politicians.¹² IVD and part of its supporters, on the other hand, accuse historians of collusion with rulers in the past and the inability to uncover the whole truth. The controversy is indicative of a struggle over representation as well as representability at a time when monopoly over narrative was broken. It reveals that the stated goal of historians as well as truth commissions, namely to erect one collective memory, is actually unattainable specifically because of the competing claims and interpretations of the past.¹³

Conclusion

The interconnectedness and the accelerated pace of the history we live in, the occasional victories and the frequent setbacks, force us to ponder a question posed by Romanian writer Emile Cioran, a philosopher who does

¹² The main contribution of the book is in its final part where it offers reflections on historiography, asserts the dangers of subordinating the historical to the political, and the call for self-critique (154). It directs its criticism against what he calls “watchdog historians” and the subordination of historical by the politician (142).

¹³ For the theoretical and academic stakes involved in the relationship between historiography and transitional justice, see, Bevernage, Burger (2014), “Transitional Justice and Historiography: Challenges, Dilemmas and Possibilities” in *Macquarie Law Journal* 13, 7-24.

not shy away from looking despair in the eye: “if all we remember are our defeats, what’s the point of all else?” But perhaps we should keep in mind that remembering defeats is an enabling act. It authorises transformation, and can be the beginning of subjectivity in history, the point at which transformation begins. The ruins of defeat become, in the words of ancient Arabic poetry, *athar darisa* (fading ruins), for those left behind to either mourn or ponder: history, says Ibn Khaldun is indeed lessons (*‘ibar*). That is the same recall of history by Tunisian writer Mahmud al-Masadi (1989), writing under French occupation, when his character Abu Hurayra reflects on old ruins in the desert: “Are they words without meaning? Or the neck of time struck off – *‘unuq al-zaman wa qad dhuriba?*” He was pondering the prospects of the survival of local temporalities under the threat of overpowering colonial ones. Walter Benjamin (1968) thought about this past in the present, not as a repetition or an emulation, but rather, as a redemptive moment, which, he says, “flashes up at a moment of danger”.¹⁴ These lessons, Ibn Khaldun’s included, have been the ones never properly learned. That is why, I think, those closest to history keep losing the plot while those closest to the theological view of the world, appear, paradoxically, to have heeded the lesson. Benjamin points to a way: “In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious” (255). Those whose temporalities are more in sync with the dead continue to seek survival beyond defeat.

But now that signs of the enemy’s defeat have become visible, we are called upon to think, in solidarity and in new ways, of our collective fate. Frantz Fanon’s vision, articulated in the late 1950s, finds renewed meaning today. He writes: “the human condition, plans for mankind, and collaboration between men in those tasks which increase the sum total of humanity are new problems, which demand true inventiveness and creativity” (Fanon 1983, 312-13). The task of re-humanisation, led by the

¹⁴ Thesis VI: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes.”

colonised or former colonised should be historical not an idealised “return to nature” or to an idealised past. “Conceived in this way, national liberation leads to the liberation and reinvention of the coloniser’s culture” itself (Guessoumi, ElKhouni, Omri 2017, 10), and from there to humanity as a whole.¹⁵ That is the direction of a new humanism. The new Arab revolutions usher in an era where people revolt for themselves. Apprehending their action cannot recall models but should resort to understanding in situation for revolution authorized a variety of forms of expression and narratives. Such a situation resists categorization, systemization, and hierarchization. Accelerated and simultaneous temporalities defy facile analysis. For this reason, archiving becomes a privileged activity. Yet recent history demonstrates that nations and individuals have been deprived of their archives, in a situation which recalls colonial practices of plunder and theft, as the case of Iraq after 2003 and the recent war against ISIS demonstrate.¹⁶ Human dignity and social justice were key slogans of the 2011 revolutions as well as protest movements in Europe and elsewhere. History in both was conceived as the work of human beings’ intent on mutual support and collaboration, in other words, a *tarafud* of human effort and creativity in the face of rising nihilism, carelessness and destruction.¹⁷

References

- Abboud, Anissa. *al-Na'na' al-Barri (Wild Mint)*. Damascus: Dar Al-Sawsan, 2004.
- Badiou, Alain. *Le réveil de l'histoire*. Paris: Nouvelles éditions Lignes, 2011.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

¹⁵ We are reminded of Marx again: “The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future.” (99)

¹⁶ For a historical overview of this plunder, see <https://merip.org/2018/05/preservation-or-plunder-the-isis-files-and-a-history-of-heritage-removal-in-iraq/>. The removal of Baath party archives to the U.S has been considered by some as “an act of pillage, which is specifically forbidden by the 1907 Hague Convention.” See:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/books/01hoov.html>.

¹⁷ This essay is dedicated to Abdeljelil Temimi, historian, citizen and inspiration. I am grateful to Lamia Benyoussef for making me part of the pioneering Beja 2018 conference where I presented the paper for the first time. My thanks go to the organisers and to St John’s College, Oxford for sponsoring my trip.

- Cherni, Zeineb. "La révolution en Tunisie: transmutation, immanence et post humanisme" in *University and Society within the Context of Arab Revolutions and New Humanism*, edited by Mohsen El Khouni, Mouldi Guessoumi and Mohamed-Salah Omri, 19-28. Tunis: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2017.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1963.
- Guessoumi, Mouldi. *Mujtama's al-thawrah (Society of the Revolution)*. Tunis: University of Manouba, 2015.
- Hudson, Michael. "Awakening, Cataclysm, or Just a Series of Events? Reflections on the Current Wave of Protest in the Arab World" in *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings: End of an Order?* Edited by Bassam Haddad, Rosie Bsheer and Ziad Abu-Rish. 17-28. London: Pluto, 2012.
- Ibn Khaldun, Abdulrahman. *Muqaddimat Ibn khaldun*, (Ibn Khaldun's Introduction). Tunis: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1991.
- Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick. *Selected Works*. New York: International Publishers, 1968.
- Klein, Naomi. "Smoking While Iraq Burns" in *The Guardian*. November 2004. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/26/usa.iraq>
- Lamont, Christopher K. and Boujeh, Hela. "Transitional Justice in Tunisia: Negotiating Justice During Transition" in *Politicka Misa*, vol. 14, no. 5, 2012.
- al-Mas'adi, Mahmud. *Haddatha Abu Hurayrah qal (Abu Hurayra Told Us)*. Tunis: Dar Al Janub, 1989.
- Omri, M. S. *Nationalism, Islam and World Literature: Sites of confluence in the writings of Mahmud al-Mas'adi*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- . "The study of the Arab world and Islam in the United States and Britain in the context of the 'war on terror'" in *Les universités et les chercheurs arabes entre créativité et censure*, edited by Abdeljelil Temimi. Tunis: FTRSI, 2011.
- . "Min ajl nadhariyyah fi al-tarafud al-adabi" (Towards a theory of literary tarafud) in *The Comparative lesson and the dialogue of literatures*, edited by Mahmoud Trashouna, 13-52. Tunis: Bait Al-Hikma, 2015.
- . "Tunisia's moment of truth: process, outcomes, expectations" in *Open Democracy*. 24 November 2016. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africawest-asia/tunisia-smoment-of-truth-process-outcomes-expectations/>

- Salih, Hashem. *Al-intifadhat al-arabiyya 'la dhaw' falsafat al-tarikh* (*Arab Uprisings in the Light of the Philosophy of History*). Beirut: Saqi books, 2013.
- Timoumi, Hedi. *Ila al-sasah al-arab: irfa'u aydikom 'an tarikhina* (*To Arab Politicians: Hands off Our History*). Tunis: Dar Muhammad Ali, 2017.
- White, Hayden. "Storytelling: *Historical and Ideological*" in *The Fiction of Narrative*, edited by Robert Doran. Baltimore: John's Hopkins UP, 2010.