

Part I: Conclusion

With this discussion of concepts of time and authenticity and how they shape the Arabic discursive landscape, we have reached the end of the first part of this book. We began in Chapter 1 by painting a picture of the standard narrative and how it assumes a recurring binary of authenticity and modernity as a framework for understanding the debates that have dominated Arab intellectual discourse. In Chapter 2, we began chipping away at this standard narrative, first by relativizing the importance of the crisis of 1967 as a starting point for contemporary Arab thought; then by suggesting that Arab debates about authenticity ought to be read also as expressions of a global turn towards authenticity; and finally by discussing alternative conceptions of authenticity articulated by three contemporary Arab thinkers – Shukrī ‘Ayyād, Fu‘ād Zakariyyā, and ‘Azīz al-‘Azma. In Chapter 3, we took our cue from these lively yet largely neglected Arab discussions of authenticity to look at the temporal structure that underlies the standard narrative. We looked at how modernity may be conceived as a project supported by a particular linear-progressive conception of time, and how, given this temporal framework, a form of binary thinking that pits authenticity over and against modernity seems natural. Next, we looked at how, in contrast to the relatively simplistic culturalist conception of authenticity prevalent in Arab thought, this concept is in fact an ideal distinctive of modernity that has given rise to an abundance of different interpretations that have particular ethical significance. In conclusion, we saw how the relation between the culturalist interpretation of authenticity and the more individualistic interpretations may be read as an effect of what has in retrospect been dubbed the Counter-Enlightenment. Moreover, I argued why it is legitimate to apply this concept to some of the intellectual developments in the Arab world over the previous two centuries, namely as an effect of a secular trend in the shaping of a modern intellectual discourse in Arabic that is based in part on the modern conceptions of time discussed earlier in this chapter.

These three chapters (together with the Introduction) have laid the groundwork for part II of this book, in which we will take an in-depth look at three Arab thinkers: Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, Adonis, and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā. Building on our discussion of the standard narrative, the Arab contestations of this narrative, and the examinations of time, authenticity, and modernity, we will explore how these concepts are used in their writings, particularly those on *turāth*. Rather than take for granted the standard narrative depiction of an opposition between authenticity and modernity, the next three chapters present a critical review of how each author uses these concepts. As we will see, each of them recognizes the problematic nature of the opposition between authenticity and modernity,

but whereas Maḥmūd tries tackle this problem head-on, namely by finding a pragmatic solution for deciding which “authentic” and which “modern” aspects a society should respects or introduce, Adonis and Ṭāhā suggest a different way of coping with the authenticity–modernity problematic. Instead of acknowledging this as a necessary opposition, these two authors, each in their own way, try to redefine the problem at hand. By adopting a different, non-linear conception of time, they change the meaning of these terms in such a way that authenticity and modernity are no longer in conflict with each other. While these coming chapters may be read as individual analyses of Arab thinkers, they collectively serve a higher aim announced in the Introduction. There, it was argued that it is not just possible but desirable to articulate different ways of understanding Arab thought that go beyond the familiar paradigm. The analyses in Part II do just that; without wanting to present anything like a definitive reading of Arab thought, they show how it is possible to present Arab thinkers and the problems they engage with in a new light by looking at the broader discursive landscape in which they operate. Such analysis is able to show not just how they react to ongoing debates, but also how they may reconfigure them by redefining some fundamental concepts of Arabic intellectual discourse.

