

## THE ARAB WORLD: WHAT ROLE FOR PHILOSOPHY?

In the introduction to the second edition of his work on philosophy and philosophers in the Islamic period- the work in which he especially contrasts between what he considers to have been the self-defeatist philosophy of an ‘oriental’ Avicenna and the assertively rationalist philosophy of the north African Averroes- the recently deceased Moroccan philosopher Mohammad Abed al-Jabiri repeats his well-known judgment that while the question whether philosophy is truly an epistemological discipline or an ideological tool may be raised and disputed in general terms, in the particular case of philosophy in the Muslim world this question is settled outright, since philosophy was blatantly used as a tool in order to defend one version or another of the religious beliefs of those who pursued it. It wasn’t, in other words, an objective intellectual medium for the pursuit of truth –as one might imagine it was, for example, for the earlier Greek masters who are credited with having begun it.<sup>1</sup>

Al-Jabiri, as we shall see, does not content himself with observing that the case of philosophy in the

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<sup>1</sup> M.A.Al-Jabiri *Nahnu wa’l-Turath: qira’at mu’asirah fi turathina al-falsafi* (Casablanca: Arab Cultural Center) 5<sup>th</sup> edn. 1986.

Islamic world is as he describes it: he further believes, first, that this characterization is not unique to early Islamic philosophy –it is true of all philosophies; and second, that *this is as it should be*, the remaining and more relevant question being for what specific role, or in service of what specific ends, philosophy should be put to use. In his case, as it may also be the case in the Arab world more generally, as we shall see, the ‘end’ is very clearly Arab, or Islamic/Arab-oriented, or having to do with freeing the Arab world, as well as the Arab mind, from the yoke of imperialist hegemony. In view of the amazingly spontaneous populous upheaval we all witnessed in Tunisia recently, sparked off by the self-torching of one dispossessed- yet another up-to-then invisible street-vendor by the name of Mohammad Abu Azizeh- we should perhaps pose the additional question to ourselves whether philosophy and philosophers are or have ever been of any ideological use in the Muslim world at all, seeing that the life and death of such unique philosophical figures as that of al-Jabiri himself seem to have contributed far less to social change in North Africa than the biting pain of poverty, its brutal suppression by authority, and the consequently spontaneous and incensed outrage of Tunisia’s masses. Is one matchstick, one is tempted to ask, worth the whole of your philosophy?

Thinking of Mohammad Abu Azizah, the answer may well seem to be ‘Yes’ if its worth is measured in purely political terms. Yet, does this mean that philosophers have nothing to do with their Societies? Al-Jabiri’s Muslim North Africa, besides the famed Averroes, boasted of such philosophical figures after him as Ibn Bajjah, or Avempace, whose most important ‘political’ work, *Self-Management of the Solitary*, being predicated on the assumption that the Ideal Republic is exactly that, namely, Ideal, sets out to explain how a true seeker of the truth, and of universal human values, should lead his life as an outsider, an alien (*ghareeb*) or a weed (*nabat*), in the midst of inevitable political imperfection. Not only do we find here a fundamental disregard to any use philosophy or philosophers might have as ideological instruments or as epistemological beacons in political contexts— let alone as instruments of change: we find, more importantly, a call for a far more basic intellectual recoil, or retreat, through which the philosopher is told he could, and *should* as a philosopher, join or rejoin the universal intellectual community to which he truly belongs. Avempace believed that, through that Plotinian-inspired mechanism called ‘the Active Intellect’, philosophers from all ages and lands could in fact *connect*, allowing for a universal meeting of minds.<sup>2</sup> Absal’s experience, in that

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<sup>2</sup> Ibn Bajjah *Risalah fi’l Ittisal*, in *Rasa’il Ibn Bajja al-Ilahiyya (Ibn Bajja’s*

wonderful political allegory of Ibn Tufayl, yet another philosopher from Muslim North Africa, tells of the same: a genuine philosopher cannot but live in isolation of the political society he finds himself in. He must seek to live on an (allegorical) island all unto himself. In the story, two youths disaffected with their society, part company in search for an answer to their disaffection, one finding it in pursuit of universal truths, and the other in politics. The attempt of Absal, turned philosopher, to rejoin his childhood friend Salaman, turned political leader, ends in failure. They must part company forever.<sup>3</sup>

Let me for a moment now shift temporal and contextual gear: not more than a month ago a considerable group of Israeli academics –mostly in the humanities and social sciences- gathered together in Jerusalem to pay tribute to one of their colleagues, Professor Yaron Ezrahi, from the University of Tel Aviv. The two-day event culminated in a panel discussion, in which Yaron Ezrahi and others, including myself, participated. It was given the title, reminiscent of the title Julien Benda<sup>4</sup> gave to his famous critique of populist ideologists, “Have Israeli Intellectuals Betrayed

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*Metaphysical Essays*), ed. M. Fakhry (Beirut: Dar al-Jil) 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Tufay, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A Philosophical Tale* tr. L.E. Goodman (Chicago: CUP) 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Julien Benda, *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, tr. and intr. Roger Kimball, (Transaction Publishers: New Brunswick) 2006.

Israel's Democracy?" My presence at the event, as I indicated in my short intervention at the time, seemed to fulfill the two roles of subject and object –the latter role as a Palestinian whose rights are dispossessed, thereby coming to embody the Israeli intellectual's dilemma; and the former role as a supposedly neutral Jerusalemite intellectual, a participant in the discussion. I do not believe I can overstate the electrified nature of the atmosphere which prevailed, in all expressing the deep frustration those present felt with Israeli policies – frustration which led some of them to speak, amazingly to my mind, of the inevitability of direct action, of the need for a wide-ranging civil disobedience campaign by Israelis themselves, against the system. I was of course well-versed in all the arguments for Palestinians to wage a civil disobedience campaign against the Occupier, but to hear Israeli intellectuals raising this as a worthwhile option to consider was absolutely new, and something which might well have sounded like music to Benda's ears, had he been in the audience. What are the conditions, I asked myself, thinking once of the retiring solitary hero of Avempace, and once of the likes of Yaron Ezrahi, or panel chairman David Shulman, activists against the occupation, and the countless others who dare –to use Edward Said's phrase- to 'speak truth to power' in their respective worlds, which make for an intellectual's plunge into the thankless world of

politics?<sup>5</sup> Would Benda have in fact supported such a plunge? More to the point, perhaps: How do we define a “plunge”? To in fact *organize* a civil disobedience campaign?

One necessary condition, I thought, for someone to be ready to take a plunge must be for such a person to be both *within* and *without*, to be an outsider on the inside, sufficiently embedded in the system while at the same time being sufficiently disengaged or independent of it. Not a ‘layman’, in Benda’s terms, or the man of the real world, but nor –as a ‘clerk’- someone so removed that their voice goes unnoticed among laymen. I shall have to come back to explain this characterization in more depth in due course, but one striking example Benda uses in this context is that of an incident related to Spinoza, who, to the peril of his life, defiantly splattered the condemnatory words of ultimate barbarism on the gate of those who had murdered the De Witts. I suppose it is similarly the combination of his defiant speech and his ‘embedding’ in the political order that must have made Averroes the object of attention and admiration of al-Jabiri –both qualities, sorry to say, that al-Jabiri himself (and perhaps many other philosophers and intellectuals in the Arab World) might not have possessed.

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<sup>5</sup> This, and other excerpts are taken from Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, (Vintage Books, New York) 1996.

But al-Jabiri was prepossessed with something else- with something Benda himself might have identified as one more negative phenomenon associated with intellectuals as he critically surveyed his own contemporary European scene- namely, with what one might in general call ‘the Arab predicament’, by which is meant, very loosely, by himself and other Arab intellectuals, any number of things –including the rise and dominance of the Jewish State in its midst- that might explain the state of total atrophy in the Arab world. His almost palpable rejection of the Avicennian school of thought was an expression of his distrust of that philosophy in his view which, turning a blind eye to the social and political context within which it exists, markets itself as a purely neutral or scientific epistemological enterprise, thus hiding its true role as an ideological tool serving the reactionary forces in society. “Can the philosopher” al-Jabiri asks, “or any intellectual for that matter, really transcend the barrier of time and place? No, I say. The philosopher who does not produce ideology is the most dangerous kind of philosopher, for he is simply reproducing a pre-existing ideology, one expressing (a pre-existing) social conflict or national interest under the guise of being a neutral statement about Man and the World. In doing this, his philosophy simply

reproduces an ideology which has already served its historical purpose”.<sup>6</sup>

I somehow doubt this surreptitious role ascribed to Avicenna. In all likelihood, the community which he influenced and which he addressed was in its entirety a marginal community, without any impact whatsoever on the wider political or social world. And his sometimes comfortable status with the ruler (I say ‘sometimes’, because, as rulers changed, and politicians plotted, he also sometimes found himself in jail) was entirely to do with his medical skills than with his adeptness at modal logic. But having passed this judgment Al-Jabiri, then, proceeds to espouse an ideology which he hopes would address the Arab World’s general atrophy, one which he weaves around what he describes as the Arab Mind, its structure, formation, and Political Expression, his main message being that a proper re-alignment with the Arab World’s intellectual past- rather than a free break with it (to *Averroism contra Avicennianism*)- would guarantee the liberation of the Arab Mind from the cultural colonization to which it has come to be subjected by ‘the West’. Almost one hundred years earlier, in 1903, and arguably in the first-ever print of a philosophical text by the indigenous presses beginning to appear in the Arab world, Arab Christian Farah Anton proposed to re-

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<sup>6</sup> Jabiri, *op.cit.* p.149

introduce Averroism,<sup>7</sup> and through this, rational secularism, as a lever to pull the Arab world out of its 19<sup>th</sup> century shackles –prompting a response at the time –whose message is sadly all too familiar by now- by Mohammad Abdo, for whom rationalism and progress did not necessarily mean secularism, and would better be served by a religious renaissance. Recently deceased Egyptian liberalist philosopher Fuad Zakariyya writes, in 1987, ‘that the Arab intellectual finds himself at the end of the twentieth century obliged to engage in a debate which Arab intellectuals had almost, at the end of the nineteenth century, been able to conclude in favor of reason and progress’.

Al-Jabiri’s ideological project, while being distinguishable from that of many other Arab philosophers and intellectual-philosophers by its emphasis on the need to carry out this cultural re-alignment, shares with all of them, as well as with his elder contemporary Abdullah al-‘Urwi, what one can almost describe as an ‘inward-looking’ obsession with the need to discover, through the correct prognosis, the true cause of the ailment of the Arab World, and the proper medication, therefore, which has to be found for it.<sup>8</sup> A survey of

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<sup>7</sup> Anton, *Farah Ibn Rushd Wa falsafutuhi* (Alexandria) 1903.

<sup>8</sup> Adullah al-‘Urwi, an older Moroccan contemporary of Jabiri, had initiated a philosophical project of ‘disengagement’ from tradition, which Jabiri, however, did not support. Strangely, the two never ‘confronted’ each other, preferring to make allusions to the ideas each of them held whenever they wished to make a criticism. See Kamal Abd el-Latif, *Al Fikr al-Fasafi fi’l Maghreb: Qir’at fi A’mal il-Urwi wa’l*

the proceedings of the 12<sup>th</sup> Philosophical Conference organized by the Egyptian Philosophical Association in the year 2000 in Cairo, around the theme ‘Philosophy In the Arab World’, and of Hassan Hanafi’s own introductory contribution in these proceedings, will quickly reveal this ailment as the epistemological centerpiece of most if not all philosophical projects. Even far away, the Parisian-based Arkoun (of Algerian descent), though heavily drawing on a western-based deconstructionist methodology as an analytical tool, devotes his life-work to this above-referred to surgical project: how to set the Arab World free of its state of atrophy –in his case, *contra* al-Jabiri, through breaking entirely free from the past. In a telling observation by Hanafi in the said proceedings: the West’s *cogito* predicates Being on Reason, while the Arab World (even going back to the times of the Mu’tazilite rationalists) predicates it on Becoming Free.<sup>9</sup> I am free, therefore I am. Hanafi traces all contemporary

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*Jabiri* (Cairo: Ru’ya for Publishing and distribution) 2008, for an appraisal of the relationship between the two.

<sup>9</sup> Hasan Hanafi, “Al-Falsafah fi’l Watan al-‘Arabi fi Mi’at ‘Am”, *Proceedings of the 12<sup>th</sup> Philosophy Conference* (Cairo: The Egyptian Philosophical Association, Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wihdah al-Arabiyyah) 2000, p.17-41. The quote can be found on p.37. The *Proceedings* were edited by Hanafi himself, who provided in his introductory paper a review of the state of philosophy in the Arab World, beginning with Afghani and Abdo. A somewhat similar exercise was attempted in 1988 by Jordan University, under the title “Contemporary Arabic Philosophy”. This was organized by the Arab Philosophy Association, headed then by Ahmad Madi, from Jordan University. The Proceedings of this conference were also published by “Markaz Dirasat al-Wihdah al-Arabiyyah” in 1988. The topics revolved around the question of freedom.

Arab philosophical projects to this fundamental principle, starting with Napoleon's colonial project in the Arab World, and with the reactive intellectual endeavors or political ideologies of French-educated Jamal el-Din al-Afghani and Mohammad Abdo- both action and reaction being, significantly, France-oriented. (I shall have more to say in a minute about this French connection). In this topography, the break-up of the Ottoman Caliphate, the renewed colonization of the Middle East, and the seemingly immovable physical as well as ideological pressure created by the State of Israel constitute milestones in the development or evolution of Arab philosophical schools or brands of thought –pan-Arabist, nationalist, Marxist, Islamicist<sup>10</sup>, to name but the main ones, but all revolving around the single issue of how to set the Arab world free.

Let me before continuing say one or two words about what I called the 'French connection': Hanafi's identification of Napoleon's invasion of the Arab world as the physical 'pinch' which roused the Arab Intellect to action may well be a remark one has heard often enough. But more may need to be said specifically about philosophy's French connection, going beyond the circumstance

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<sup>10</sup> To be distinguished from Islamist, meaning to be a Muslim. *Islamicism*, as it is being used here, is a politicized ideology of Islam, or the presentation and practice of Islam as a political ideology.

of Afghani and Abdo, the two ‘fathers’ of contemporary Arab intellectual thought, having sojourned in France for a part of their education: one way or another, the overwhelming majority of philosophers in the Arab world are and have been influenced by the French system of education. An informal survey of the statistics held by the Arab Association of Arab Universities which I conducted almost ten years ago revealed that 300 of the approximately 400 Professors of philosophy presently spread around the Arab world are concentrated in Egypt and Lebanon alone— both, as we know, ex-French colonies, where philosophy as a subject is taught at the school level, quite unlike the situation of those Arab countries that fell to British rule, such as Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait or the Trucial States, where philosophy is neither taught at the school level, nor even heard of in respectable terms. With a few exceptions, notably that of Syrian philosopher Sadeq Jalal el-Azem, whose PhD was earned from Yale University in the United States, most of the prominent intellectual or philosophical voices heard in the Arab world, whether in Lebanon and Egypt or further afield in other North African States -such as those of al-Jabiri, Hanafi, Arkoun, etc.- have either acquired their education in France, or from teachers in their respective countries who themselves acquired it in France. It is quite remarkable that such a significant development arose from the simple and accidental

fact that the French educational system, unlike that of the British, admits of introducing philosophy as a subject at the school level. This simple fact automatically finds expression in the number of university students willing to study philosophy as a discipline with a guaranteed job in the education sector after graduation, and this in turn is reflected in the number of university philosophy departments and professors. I do not of course wish to discount the importance of voices educated outside of France, but the fact that the *critical mass* of Arab ‘clerks’ or philosopher/intellectuals are French-influenced may explain, returning now to our initial discussion about what these intellectuals consider to be the centre-piece of their professional interest, their preoccupation with what Benda called ‘the real’ or ‘material’ world of the ‘laymen’. There have, of course, been notable exceptions, and I am thinking here of Abdul Rahman Badawi, a solitary weed –to use Avempace’s terms- if ever there was one. Also French-educated, Badawi, who collapsed forlorn on a side walk in his self-chosen city of exile, Paris, almost ten years ago, may well exemplify the Benda paradigm of a real ‘clerk’, but is one, unlike Spinoza, whose voice never strays from his books. Generally unpopular in the Arab world, on his death Syrian philosopher Anton Maqdisi ventured to compare him and what he perceived as his useless philosophical career with philosophy’s own uselessness to the Arab world.

Maqdisi's commentary on Badawi's professional work is extremely unfair: in many ways, Badawi excelled in ways no others in the Arab world have done (and his colleagues later acknowledged in a special volume dedicated to him his unique contributions to the study of the Greek legacy in Islamic philosophy);<sup>11</sup> but Maqdisi's other comment on philosophy having 'abandoned' or 'deserted' the Arab world may well be to the point, given not specially Badawi's professional interests, but those of his populist detractors, whose centre-piece of interest remains how to free the Arab world.

Interestingly, this characterization of the basic ailment in the Arab World –namely, the absence of freedom- is precisely what the first UNDP Human Development Report published in 2002 also fingers as the major deficiency, the emphasis in the Report however being on the multitudinous formal and informal internal shackles permeating Arab societies which prohibit all the basic kinds of freedoms human beings are entitled to, as opposed to those other shackles brought about by the hegemony of an imperialist politics.

Even so –even, that is, with the epistemological tool of philosophy being given this highfaluting

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<sup>11</sup> *Dirasat 'Arabiyyah Hawl Abd al-Rahman Badawi*, ed. Ahmad Atiyyah (Beirut: Dar al-Madar al-Islami), 2002

ideological role of unearthing the freedom pill, the burning question remains: have philosophers, intellectuals, academics, in the Arab world, actually *found* the answer to their quest, or what needs to be done in order to bring about that freedom? Or has it rather been the case, sadly, or perhaps inevitably, that one matchstick is worth the whole of your philosophy?

Al-Jabiri was one of twenty two ‘intellectuals’- others included such figures as Egyptian positivist philosopher Zaki Nagib Mahfouz, Marxist Mahmoud Amin al-Alim, Syrian literary critic Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said), liberalist philosopher Fuad Zakariyya) who attended an exceptional workshop held in Kuwait in 1974 with the specific aim of finding a cure to the Arab World’s present atrophy –hopefully, as the discussion went, from the Arab World’s glorious past. In a sense, the debate which took place at that colloquium has defined the contours of Arab intellectual debate ever since.<sup>12</sup> A very important figure declined to attend, and in fact later wrote a scathing attack of the colloquium. Mahdi el-‘Amil, an activist member of the central bureau of the Lebanese Communist Party, besides being a sharp and prolific critic and analyst, essentially depicted the entire discourse in that colloquium as being victim

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<sup>12</sup> An excellent account of the event was written by Issa Boullata, *Trends And Issues In Contemporary Arab Thought* (State University of New York Press) 1990.

to a capitalist conceptual framework which ignores the defining fact that Arab Society is but the inevitable organic ‘other side’ of Capitalist Society, the two being integrally related, and with the ills of the former, such as endemic corruption, an authoritarian system of government, and the confiscation of all kinds of basic freedoms and rights being the natural manifestation of this relationship. We cannot think of delivering the Arab World from its present state of atrophy, in other words, without severing it from its economic Master.<sup>13</sup> In a sense, Mahdi al-Amil was presaging the UNDP report, but with a twist: the deficiency of freedoms in the Arab World is the direct result of the Capitalist’s World hegemony. To remove corruption, and bad governance, remove the West’s meddling fingers. I will just quickly, and perhaps provocatively insert here, that Abd el-Sattar Kassem, a Palestinian political scientist from al-Najah University in Nablus in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, makes an almost parallel argument today with respect to the relationship between the Palestinian Authority Areas and the Donor Community. In effect, he argues, foreign aid has not only distorted the Palestinian economy; it has also distorted Palestinian political values.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For a special website posting the works of Mahdi el-Amel, see: <http://www.yamli.com/ar/#t=web&q=%D9%85%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%8A%20%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84&s=0&safe=0>

<sup>14</sup> Abd al-Sattar Kassem, *Al-Taharrur min Iqtisadiyyat al-Qimar wa’l Khida’*: *Maqtu’a fikriyya fi’l Iqtisad al-Siyasi* (Al-Quds University) 2010.

While one can understand this almost obsessive preoccupation with the state of the Arab World by Arab philosophers and intellectuals, one cannot help wondering how useful all this wondering has been, whether to the Arab world itself or to their own professional fields. One cannot also help wondering, referring to Benda yet again, whether this preoccupation hasn't in some way been in fact harmful, often through the tendency to fawn over their respective publics, and through identifying itself with roused political passion, instead of 'speaking truth to power'. Indeed, what is it that best represents the 'power' in this context to which that phrase by Edward Said refers, or should refer? Is it Government? The rulers? Or is it, especially by now, a public let loose, neither respected sufficiently to be spoken the truth to, nor sufficiently cared for to deliver from its shackles, and which had become, therefore, its own most dangerous enemy? Mahdi al-'Amil, to whom I just referred, being a 'clerk layman' –if one can use this expression- was assassinated by religious fanatics in Lebanon almost ten years after the Kuwait colloquium. He was the second Marxist philosopher to have been assassinated for being a 'clerk layman', the other having been Hussein Mruwweh. However, not only Marxist 'clerk laymen' have been assassinated: fundamentalist theoretician Sayyed Qutub was executed at the

hands of the authorities in Cairo, while Shi'ite philosopher/cleric Mohammad Baqer el Sader was summarily assassinated by the Saddam Regime.

In concluding my remarks for today, let me first sum up by projecting the following paradigms, and follow this up with a few comments on yet another paradigm, that of Pierre Bourdieu and Noam Chomsky, as this is identified as the object of criticism by yet another of our progressive Arab philosophers, the Lebanese Ali Harb<sup>15</sup>: First, then, the contemporary Arab world seems to have received or cultivated philosophers and intellectuals of all hues, some who have also been actors on the political stage, like Mahdi al'Amil, who was assassinated, or the liberalist Egyptian Sa'd Eddin Ibrahim, who was jailed, and others who, like Badawi, simply lived and died on the sidewalk of real life (the first sentence in his autobiography reads: I was born by accident, and by accident I shall leave this world). In-between, the Arab world has had figures with intellectual *gravitas*, like al-Jabiri, whose political influence, however, was almost nil. But there is another kind of intellectual, the kind Lebanese philosopher Ali Harb has singled out for criticism, but examples of whom are probably rare to find in the Arab world, though Edward Said may be one, though he is not

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<sup>15</sup> Ali Harb *Asnaf al-Nathariyyah Wa Atyaf al-Hurriyyah* (Beirut, Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi) 2001.

fingered by Ali Harb, namely, the paradigm of half-way activists, if one may use this expression, or of figures like Pierre Bourdieu and Noam Chomsky. Ali Harb, who has been arguing for an anti-elitist grass-roots philosophy of constructive action, finds fault with those two precisely on account of their transportation of their academic standing to the public sphere, where they set out to bring weight with that standing to their statements or protests on social issues. He believes that, not only are their efforts in this particular sphere utopian and perhaps even self-serving, but that their intrusions may even be harmful by providing the dispossessed with false hope.

I shall now conclude by invoking yet another of Benda's examples of the required clerk, namely Zola's defense of Dreyfus in the latter's trial. Here Zola brought in his academic standing as a writer to weigh in on his position in the public sphere. Chomsky as well as Bourdieu (until his death almost ten years ago) likewise fulfill the same role. Arguably, the recently deceased Palestinian scholar and intellectual Edward Said also played this role. The Israeli academics who gathered to honor Yaron Ezrahi were of a similar mind. In each of these cases, the scholar or academic who is already accomplished in his or her own field feels a sense of public duty, of a magnitude that impels him or her to speak out. Three weeks ago, a group of 150

Israeli academics called for a boycott of Ariel University in the West Bank. What they did was to use their academic ‘clout’ to weigh in on the political debate in the country, by expressing a practical objection to occupation. Are such voices, one might ask, mere harbingers of false dreams? Is silence in this case a moral option? Is taking the practical step of becoming political actors in the material world the answer?

Over and above all these questions, yet another lingers: what does the ‘moral voice’ in the heart of the ailing Arab world, and particularly in the heart of the festering Israeli-Palestinian conflict, say? What are Palestinians intellectuals saying? What role in their own immediate conflict have they been playing?

I shall address these questions in my next lecture.

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